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Ace-in-the-Hole Haggarty

By the Same Author



Lonesome River Range

Lonesome River Justice

R. M. HANKINS.



Ace-in-the-Hole
Haggarty

1945

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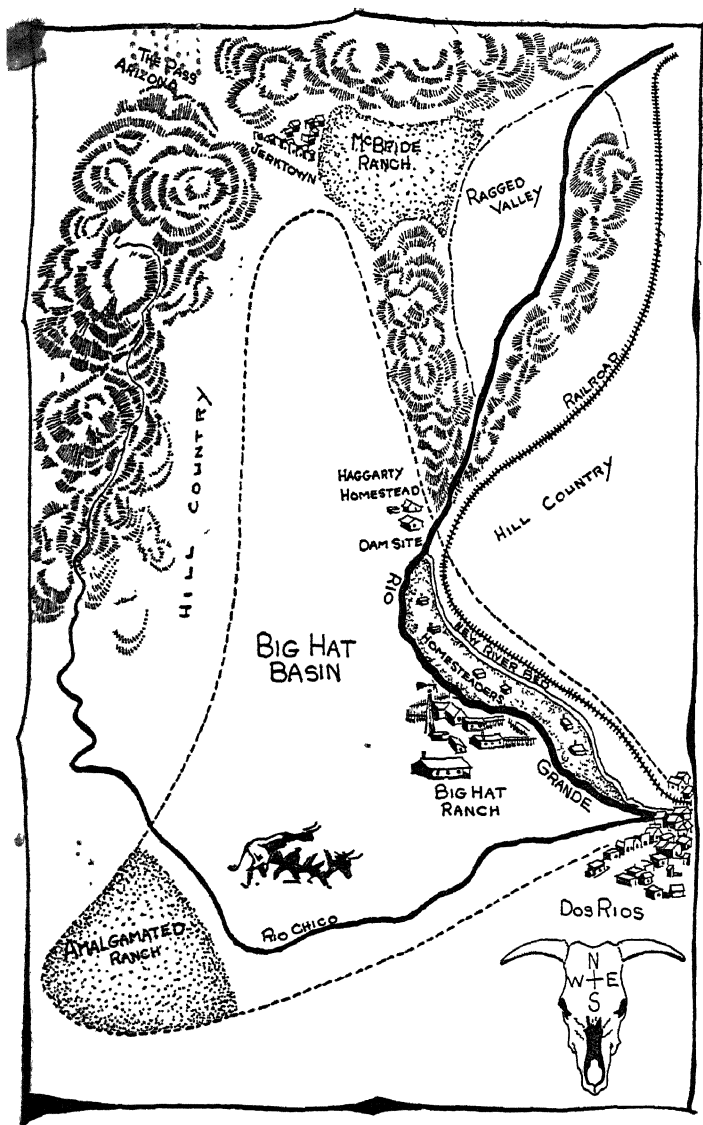
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It was one of those boogery nights with the moon so bright that the bass were striking in the stock pond—and it was so still you could hear them splash. Every once in a while a cloud would drift in front of the moon and throw crazy shadows like men sneaking around the barns and blacksmith shop. Yes sir—it was a boogery night, a fine night for a killing!

It was so quiet I could hear the bass splashing—but I never would have heard Haggarty come cat-footing down the hall if it hadn't been for that damned song he was singing. All about the pale moon and the green mountain.

He was weak and drawn from the loss of blood and his eyes were as bright as Ravenhill's diamond stick-pin from the fever that still burned in him—yet he came cat-footing down the hall light and easy on the balls of his feet, a strange looking .38 swinging at each hip.

Skinnymalink noticed the .38s first. "Those aren't your regular man-killing guns, Mr. Haggarty," she sneered at him in that queer way they talked to each other, like a couple of strange dogs bristling. "You

going frog hunting in the moonlight with those pea-shooters? ”

“ No, Miss Benedict,” he answered her, very polite but sorta leaving the idea that he was being polite on purpose—and aggravating her like he wanted to do. “ No frogs, Miss Anne. Maybe a few night crawlers. Evening, Mr. Benedict,” he said to me; “ nice evening for a killing. Or even just a plain stomping.”

“ Nice night for a murder, too, Haggarty,” I told him. “ Better get back in bed. You ain’t got the strength to thumb a hammer—let alone sit a horse long enough to get to town, where I gather you think you are going. Get back in bed, Haggarty.”

“ Sorry, Mr. Benedict,” Haggarty said, “ but I got things to do.”

“ They’ll keep, damn your eyes,” I yelled at him. “ You haven’t got the chance of a snowball in hell and you know it. You’re worth a hundred thousand dollars, *dead*, to Ravenhill. McBride’s cured and gunning for you—and likely Al Jenkins has a few of his boys in town. You won’t last five minutes in Dos Rios, Haggarty! ”

“ Afraid to risk the odds, huh? ” Haggarty asked me, laughing at me with his eyes.

“ Yes, damn you,” I yelled at him. “ I’m afraid of the odds. I’ve got twenty thousand bucks tied up in you, Haggarty, and you won’t do me a bit of good dead.”

"Sorry, Mr. Benedict," Haggarty said, not looking the least bit sorry, "but I got things I want to do—and this is the night I want to do 'em!"

His eyes were as bright and happy as a kid's on Christmas Eve looking forward to a big tomorrow. He didn't look at all like Killer Haggarty—the fever had burned away the hard lines left by fighting and shooting and killing and prison—and left him looking young and clean again. He didn't look like Killer Haggarty at all—he looked just like a clean young cowpuncher in his best shirt going to town on payday night.

Skinnymalink noticed it too and softened up a little and spoke kindly to him, the first time I'd ever seen her do anything but snap at him.

"Better get you a little heavier artillery, Haggarty," she said. "No use going bear hurfing with a switch."

"These thirty-eights will do fine, Miss Anne," Haggarty told her. "They're good guns. I've been saving them for this night. They'll shoot where I point 'em and stop what I shoot at. They're light and fast and fancy."

"That's the way you feel, huh?" Skinnymalink asked him, speaking almost kindly like to this killer whose guts she hated.

"That's the way I feel, Miss Anne," Haggarty told her, "light and fast and fancy. Well, good night. See you in hell, Grandpop," he added to me—and was gone.

I could hear him singing all the way down to the corral—all about the pale moon shining above the green mountain—and pretty soon I could hear his horse fancy-footing off into the night just like it had caught his don't-give-a-damn spirit.

It must have been the fever in him, I thought—making him so brave and reckless—letting himself get sucked in by a trap that anybody could see through. It must have been the fever—for Haggarty had proved out as crooked as a dog's hind leg and as cagy as they come. He almost seemed yellow—and maybe he was—the trouble he took to dodge a fight and save his own skin when the odds were wrong. He'd stayed off the ridges in the daytime and out of lighted windows at night and he hardly ever slept twice in the same place. He'd taken talk from men that weren't half as fast as he was with a six-gun—talk that I never would have taken from a man twice as fast as me. Yes sir, he'd lied and sneaked and eaten crow to stay alive when the odds were wrong—and yet here he was going up against a hundred to one percentage, happy about it. It didn't add up right.

"Something's wrong with all this," I told Skinnymalink. "It don't add up right. Our yellow-bellied killer shouldn't be doing this. There must be a joker in the deck somewhere."

Skinnymalink didn't answer right off. She got out

her damned knitting and fooled with it for a spell and didn't say a word for a long, long time. Finally she put it away and started humming that damned song Haggarty had been singing—all about the pale moon shining above the green mountain—and pretty soon her eyes lit up like a couple of stars and she went and got her hat and sheepskin coat.

"It all adds up pretty good, Dad, if you know what to add to what," she said. "Think I'll go on into town and keep score on this deal. Looks like this is Haggarty's night to settle for his sins and I want to see what goes on. Wouldn't miss it for the world, Dad."

"What's it all about, Sis?" I asked her.

"Long story, Dad," she said, "and I haven't time to stop and draw you a picture. But remember those guns Haggarty had tonight . . . remember whose they were, if you can, and maybe the whole thing will add up for you after a while. Don't wait up for me, Grandpop"—and Skinnymalink was gone, too.

What the hell goes on, I wondered, nursing a water glass full of whiskey—the one drink a day that Doc Brady had cut me down to.

What the hell goes on—first Haggarty looking ten years younger and not half as mean, and then him calling me Grandpop. And Skinnymalink—calling me Grandpop, too, and then running off to see Haggarty get his hide nailed to the barn.

Hell, she couldn't be in that kind of trouble, I thought. She wouldn't want to see him killed if she was.

Remember those guns, she'd said—remember those .38s swinging at Haggarty's hips—and all at once I remembered where I'd seen 'em before and whose guns they were and I couldn't sit there any longer.

"Jose," I yelled at the stable boy, "get me that buckboard here in five minutes flat or I'll kick the seat out of your pants up between your ears!"

I couldn't sit there—I had to get to Dos Rios before they rubbed Haggarty out. I had to take a shot at him myself, the low-down son. Those were Jinglebob's .38s Haggarty was carrying. The guns Jinglebob had worn the day he died . . . the guns he'd taken so much time looking for in the warden's office when he broke out of the Arizona penitentiary that the guards had caught up with him and he got wounded before he got away. They were the guns Skinnymalink had given Jinglebob—but they weren't on his body when they found him. The guy that killed him had taken them.

I had to get to town before Haggarty was killed—and if I couldn't kill him myself I at least wanted to see it done!

Who the hell was Jinglebob, you ask?

Excuse me, stranger—I forgot you didn't know about Jinglebob, the finest son a man ever raised and lost through his own bullheadedness. Have another

three, four fingers—and I'll tell you about how I built up the biggest damned ranch in the territory.

It all starts back when I was young and healthy and could do my own fighting—back when I didn't have to hire a low-down gun-slinger like Haggarty to do my fighting for me. If anybody had ever told me that I would get old and crippled and so weak-minded I'd get sucked into a deal where I'd hire a crook to fight the crooks I'd have called him a liar to his teeth.

But let me tell you the story from the start—how I built up the biggest damned ranch in the territory and raised a fine son. A boy that rode off to his death because he couldn't stand the bullheadedness of his father. A son that should have been running the Big Hat when I got old—instead of letting it get in the hands of Haggarty—the lying, thieving yellowbelly that got the whole damned county against us and then went off and left us with our pants down!

Let me tell you all about it—and then maybe you'll understand why I had to be there, why I, old and crippled as I was, had to take the first shot at Killer Haggarty!

☆ 2 ☆

Wars do funny things to people!

When Lee surrendered and the war was over MacGregor and Add Pearce and I didn't even bother to go back home and see our folks. We hit out for New Mexico. Hell, our minds were made up—so we got on our horses and worked our way out to New Mexico. We'd decided to just rub out and start over and we did.

We'd talked about it a lot during the war and we'd all three of us figured we could do better in a new country that a man could grow up with instead of going back to the burned out, starved out country where we were raised. And the war had left its mark on us!

Pearce was the best educated of us all. He'd been away at law school when the war broke out and just barely got his degree before he hurried home to join up. He was smart as a whip, Pearce was; he wanted to be a statesman, another Thomas Jefferson—but he spent most of the Civil War shining the general's boots.

“When this thing is wound up,” Pearce used to tell us around the campfire at night, “I'm going to some

little place that's going to grow into a big place, and I'm going to grow with it—I'm going to get into politics on the ground floor—and I'm going to run the place. I'm going to have power before I get through. Maybe I'll start as constable or deputy sheriff or something like that—but I'm going up the ladder until I run the state. What you going to do, Benedict—not that I give a damn, but a guy is supposed to be polite and listen now and then. Be good practice for me to hear you out.”

“Listen, you sorry son,” I would tell him, “you run the state and I'll make money in it. Me—I'm going out to one of the territories and work like hell and build me up the biggest damned ranch in the country. Biggest ranch a man ever heard of—that's what I'm going to have.”

I'd been poor all my life, and damned near starved to death during the retreat from Richmond—and I wanted money!

MacGregor would look at us and laugh, kinda off tune. Mac had killed a lot more Yanks than we had and it didn't set right with his Presbyterian conscience, somehow.

“You fellows are awful ambitious for a couple of gents that just got hell whipped out of them,” he'd say. “Seems like you'd have enough of fighting and struggling and such for a while.”

"What you aim to do when peace comes, Mac?" I'd ask.

"Nothing much, Harry lad," he'd say. "Get me a job. A hard job, I guess—where I could save a little money and start me a store. Or maybe a saloon—not too big a one—just enough so I can make a living without stepping on somebody's toes. Just make me a living and watch the world go by. Guess I could do that just as well out in New Mexico as anywhere. Guess I'll trail along with you and Pearce."

So that's how MacGregor and Add Pearce and I came to New Mexico and went to work on Old Man Atkins' ranch just out of Dos Rios a piece—and after while we all got to do what we wanted to. Pearce got to be the Big Augur in politics and Mac opened him a little saloon and I got me the biggest damned ranch in the territory.

It wasn't as easy as it sounds, no sir. It took a lot of time—fifteen, twenty years—and we all had to work like hell and help each other get started, but we had our sights set and knew where we were going and it all worked out in time.

MacGregor didn't want a whole lot so he got it first. We all three of us worked for Old Man Atkins for a couple of years—and Mac saved his wages over and above a little for liquor and tobacco and got him a stake together. I had a couple of hundred saved myself and

Pearce kicked in with a little—and we set Mac up in the Log Cabin Bar in Dos Rios. Wasn't anything much—just a log house about the size of a box car—but Mac stocked good liquor and sold it at a fair price and it caught on right away. He didn't have any professional gamblers or any fancy women around—just a place where a man could go and wet his whistle in peace and know he wasn't going to get poisoned or rolled for his money—and Mac made a good living out of it right from the start.

Pearce was next to get started on the road he wanted to travel. He'd been shining up to the sheriff and brushing up on his law with the county attorney—and when the deputy sheriff got careless and didn't frisk a Mexican for knives before he turned his back, Sheriff Osborne appointed Pearce his deputy right after the burying. Pearce made a good, hard-working deputy, ran his share of the risks upholding the law, and got to be pretty well liked by folks in the county. He started shining up to Judge Fraser, too—studying a little law with him at night and yes-sir and no-sir-ing him and helping look up decisions and such—and when Osborne decided he was getting too old for sherifing Judge Fraser sorta threw his weight to getting Pearce elected.

Mac and I helped out all we could, too. We put up a little money and bought some beer and had some barbecues and rounded up all the cowhands we knew—and

between us we got Pearce elected sheriff. From then on he started going up the political ladder.

It began to look like I was the guy that wasn't going to get what I started out after! Looked for a spell like I was going to be left at the post—and then Old Man Atkins got sick as a horse and Doc Brady ordered him out of the country to a lower altitude. I'd been taking half of my pay in calves that Old Man Atkins was good enough to let run with his stock—and by the time he had to sell out I had me a nice marketable bunch of steers. So I sold them and Mac let me have quite a bit of money and Pearce got some big gambler that owned half the hell holes in Dos Rios to go on my note for the rest of what I needed to buy Old Man Atkins out.

From then on I started building me up the biggest damned ranch in the territory. It was pretty tough going at first. I was 'way in debt and had to work like hell and run my ranch on a shoestring, with hardly any help, so I could pay off the bank and the money I'd borrowed from Mac and Pearce. Took me about three years to get even, and a couple more to get enough money ahead to work out my plans—and then I hired me some tough hands and started out to run the Big Hat Basin.

I wanted the whole Big Hat Basin for my ranch . . . about 300,000 acres of good pasture land, all in the low valley country where the winters were mild and the

cattle grew like weeds—but there were a lot of other ranchers using it too and I had to fight to get it!

It was all free land, then—open range that anybody could use if they were strong enough to hold it. As long as it was free it belonged to the strongest guy that got there first and had the toughest outfit.

So I got me a tough outfit. I hired Al Jenkins to ramrod it for me—as tough a bunch of gun-fighting cowhands as ever forked saddles. Al Jenkins was big and rough and tough—and he was smart as a whip. He must have run afoul of the law somewhere or other—he never talked and I could only guess—but he had a good, healthy respect for the right way of doing things, in spite of being absolutely without any morals or respect for other folks' property.

“ You know, Benedict,” he'd tell me, “ we can get us a lot of good hands that can fight and shoot and run this valley to suit ourselves. But sooner or later somebody is going to get his toes stepped on once too often and is going to look things up in the book and get the law down on us. You got a good ranch here, and I reckon money in the bank—and we'd better take a look at the book ourselves and see how we can run all these gents out legal-like instead of burning them out and running off their stock and branding their mavericks.”

“ What you got in mind, Al? ” I asked him.

"I don't know exactly," he said, "but there must be something these guys haven't thought of."

"You go find out," I told him, "and every tenth calf is yours from now on."

So Al Jenkins—the guy that must have been an outlaw, he had such a healthy respect for the law—went and found out. He was gone three, four weeks and when he came back he had a story to tell.

"Every drop of water in the basin," Jenkins said, "comes from two rivers. You can't raise cattle without water."

"So? " I asked.

"So we get the water—and the range is ours," Jenkins said.

"How do we get it, Al? " I asked.

"Your friend Pearce has got a franchise for a railroad," Jenkins said. "It runs along the Rio Grande, follows the bed all the way—and the government gives them land a mile each side of their right of way. You buy forty miles of river bottom land from Pearce's railroad—forty sections, that's all—the land on the far side is all mountains and ain't worth a damn. You just buy the forty sections on the low side of the river. And you got the water sewed up. You can't raise cattle without water."

"There's still the Rio Chico," I said.

"Yeah, there is," Al Jenkins admitted, "but there

ain't much to it, don't reckon there's more than eight or ten sections it runs through. It winds around an awful lot—must be twenty-five or thirty miles of it—but it don't run through a hell of a lot of land. And it's all open land—there ain't no reason why some of us boys couldn't homestead it.”

“All right, Al,” I told him, “I'll buy the railroad land; you go to work on homesteading the frontage on Rio Chico. I'll double the boys' pay and pay 'em well for their relinquishments when they've proved up. Your pay stays like it is—but every tenth calf is yours.”

So I got my water rights—in a couple of years I had all the water in the Big Hat Basin—and I got control of the whole damned valley. Big Hat cattle ranged the full length and breadth of it—fat, sleek cattle with my brand on 'em, every one. They were all mine—thousands of 'em, eating their heads off and piling up money for me on the biggest damned ranch in the territory. I was sitting pretty, I thought—but I never dreamed what it was going to cost me.

I got rich in a hurry—but I built up trouble for myself that didn't bounce back on me until twenty years later. You can't ruin men and get off scot free. I got my water and my ranch and my money, all right—but the price I had to pay in the long run was more than it was worth!

There wasn't another drop of water in the basin for

cattle to drink from—and the other three big ranches, and maybe ten or twelve little ones that had been using the basin to graze in, had to take to the hills for their water—and they had to fight the winter cold and the deep snows and the sparse grass. Where their calf crop had been three hundred it fell off to one hundred for the same amount of work and the same amount of money invested—and the stock they brought to market was lean and stringy and didn't bring the price the fat stock from the Basin brought.

Yes sir, they hated me, those men I drove from the Big Hat Basin—Borger of the Crown, Allison of the East Brim, and Coulehand of the West Brim, and a half a dozen small fry, too—they hated my very guts and they waited their time to get even. They waited twenty years—but it must have been worth it to 'em.

And there was Al Jenkins! Greedy, grasping Al Jenkins—he got every tenth calf he raised to slap his own brand on, but that wasn't enough! And when I wouldn't give him more he took it!

Al had got married since I hired him and homesteaded him a section up in the high hill country—and I reckon he thought he ought to cash in on the money I was making—so he started putting his brand on more Big Hat calves than his tenth called for.

I caught him at it red-handed. We'd usually cut his share of calves out at round-up time and slapped his

brand on 'em—and the calves that followed his cows we branded with his brand, too.

And then one day I caught him with a Big Hat cow tied up. There was a little fire dying out and a running iron cooling in Al's hand, and a red heifer calf bawling to beat hell with Al's brand fresh burned on it.

It was a Big Hat cow. Al was caught and he knew it. He didn't waste any time talking but went for his gun. Quicker than a flash, Al was, but he was shooting from his knees and his aim was bad. His shot took me in the left leg and knocked me off my horse and his second shot smacked the heel off my boot.

I'd lit on my back with my feet towards Al and by Al's second shot I'd got both guns blazing and managed to hit him in the gun arm. It was pure damned luck, but it saved my bacon and gave me the drop on him.

I should have ended his miserable life right then and there. It would have saved a world of grief later on, but something held me back.

"Get your gear and move off the place, Al," I told him. "I ought to kill you but I ain't going to this time. But I will if I ever catch you tampering with any more Big Hat stock."

"All right, Mr. Benedict," Al said, bleached snowy white he was so damned scared. "Reckon I should have been content with one out of every ten."

"Reckon you should have," I told him, "and the deal

still stands. I'm not a man to go back on my word—let me know where you settle and I'll send you your calves—but don't show your face around here again or I'll kill you on sight. And unbuckle your rifle and leave it on the ground—I ain't risking any pot shots after you ride away."

Jenkins looked at me kinda funny for a spell, while he unstrapped his .30-.30 with his good hand and got in his saddle. "Reckon I'll be up at my place in the Pass, Mr. Benedict," he said, shaking his head like he couldn't quite believe he just lost a good job and missed hearing the angels sing by a split hair. "You can keep your damned calves, Mr. Benedict. Reckon a man's life is worth more than a few calves. I'll stop by the ranch and have 'em send a wagon for you."

Yes sir—then is when I should have killed Al Jenkins—right then and there, when it would have been justified by law and by my conscience. Yes sir—I should have done it then, instead of being faced with doing it again twenty years later.

Twenty years later Al Jenkins' daughter Jennifer grew up—as loose with her morals as Al was with his rope!

Yes sir—I should have killed Al Jenkins that day and saved a lot of grief—for Al Jenkins' daughter grew up and ruined my son Jinglebob. Plumb ruined him and drove him to his death, when I needed him most.

Twenty years later I was old and sick and the coyotes were closing in on me—all because I didn't kill Al Jenkins that day on the Big Hat.

Funny thing, it was a coyote that first showed me what was happening to me—a mangy, moth-eaten coyote I ran onto gorging itself on a calf just like the one Al Jenkins^x had misbranded twenty years before!

☆ 3 ☆

It took me five shots to hit that dam [^]coyote. If it hadn't been gorged on that dead calf it was eating and too blamed sleepy to be scared I wouldn't have got it in five shots—but it just stood there and looked at me and let me empty my gun at it. The fifth shot hit it just back of the head and broke its back.

I hadn't pulled a gun since I'd had the run-in with Pete Faris a couple of years back. Pete was a pretty tough character—a nester that had been a cowman and a gun-slinger before he took up a claim. He'd killed three, four men not counting Indians and he wasn't a guy to monkey with just for the fun of it—but he'd run out of meat and I caught him butchering a Big Hat yearling.

I wouldn't have done more than warn him, for I had a lot of yearlings—but Pete didn't know what was in my mind and pulled his gun. He had it out before I drew but I was right that day and got him through the shoulder before he fired a shot. Made me feel kinda good, at that.

Don't get me wrong. I never did like shooting folks, but a man's got to fight every once in a while for what is his—and it gave me a hell of a lot of satisfaction to know that I could still shoot fast enough and straight enough to take care of myself and my property. It did me a hell of a lot of good—almost made me feel young again like I was when I built the Big Hat up from a shoestring outfit to the biggest damned ranch in the territory, back when I didn't give a damn whose toes I stepped on.

And then—just two years later—it took me five shots to kill a coyote that just stood there, twenty or thirty feet away. A coyote that didn't have a gun and wasn't shooting at me.

Hell, Harry Benedict, I said to myself, you're slipping—you're getting old, Harry Benedict. You're all washed up—you couldn't lick a one-armed blind man with his both legs broke. You're through, Harry Benedict—an old, broken-down fellow like you can't last long in a country where a man has got to fight to keep what is his!

I rode on home slow and easy, doing a lot of thinking, walking my horse to favor my left leg, the one that Al Jenkins had broke with his bullet twenty odd years before. It had been bothering me lately—all sore and stiff and my boot felt too tight on it—just like the finger on my left hand where the ring Ann had given me

when we got married was getting a little tight and I could feel the pulse under it.

Go see Doc Brady, my common sense told me. Go let the Doc look you over. Likely it's just some little something or other that a few pills will set right in no time at all.

Yeah, the sour side of me chipped in—the part of me that used to keep me from drinking more than I could handle and wouldn't let me bet my deuces in a cut-throat game—yeah, you know damned well that it ain't just some little something wrong with you. You should have seen Brady when you first started feeling bad a couple of years ago and you know it. You don't eat what you should and you drink too damned much and you worry all the time and can't sleep at nights. You're old and sick, Harry Benedict—and the wolves are going to take back everything that you took away from them. You ain't able to stop them—you can't stand up and fight for your ranch and your daughter, Harry Benedict—and doctors ain't going to do you a damned bit of good. You should have hung on to your son, Harry Benedict, and kept him by you—and let him run what was rightfully his.

You should have let Jinglebob lead his own life—and make his own mistakes and play his cards the way he saw 'em. That's the way you should have done it,

Harry—and you should have helped him when he needed it.

But you didn't—you were too damned bullheaded—and now he's gone and you're up molasses creek without a paddle—and little pink pills won't do you a damned bit of good. Go ahead—see your doctor and take his little pills and imagine they'll save the world for you. They won't, and you know it—but it's a straw to grab at!

I didn't sleep much that night and I was damned glad to see the sun come up next morning so I could get me a horse and go to Dos Rios to see Doc Brady.

It was a pretty tough ride—my leg was throbbing like hell—and I should have taken the buckboard, but there are some things a man's pride won't let him do.

I could hide the pain in my leg while I was mounting and riding off the place—nobody paid any particular attention to me anyways—but I couldn't make the pain stop and it damned near killed me before I got to town. It was almost more than a man could stand, even me, who'd always been tougher than barbed wire. It seemed like my whole left leg was on fire and I could feel the burn of it clear up to my armpit, like somebody jabbing hot needles into me.

Doc Brady wasn't what you'd call sympathetic, the grouchy old son.

“Hell, Benedict,” he said, “fellows like you give me

a big pain in the behind. You drive yourselves like steam engines for twenty, thirty years. You drink too much and you eat enough for three people and you smoke those damned black cigars until you're all black inside—and then when you're wore out you want me to give you a little pill that will make you good as new the next day. It don't work that way."

"What have I got to do, Doc?" I asked him, humble as a pie.

"You've got to take it easy, Harry," he said, shaking his head. "You've got to stay off a horse, for one thing. Just sit around and rot, I reckon. Sleep all you can and drink a hell of a lot of water and damned little whiskey. You've got to cut down on your smoking and drinking. You ought to cut it out altogether, but I know you won't—so just cut it 'way down. Take things easy. Rest all you can. Don't eat much—try to keep yourself hungry all the time."

"Just what the hell is wrong with me, Elmer?" I asked him, sorta hoping he'd say it was getting drunk last Saturday night or the chili I'd eaten down at Mexican Pete's three, four days back or something of the kind that would clear up in a week or ten days.

"Quite a lot of things wrong with you, Harry," Doc Brady said, not pulling his punches. "Chances are you ain't going to live very long if you don't change your ways. Your pump is getting kind of weak for one

thing—damned weak, in fact. Your kidneys are tired as hell from working off all that hard liquor and red meat you’ve been filling yourself with. And you’ve got a bad touch of plain old rheumatism. You’re a pretty battered old pot that’s been to the well too damned often. On top of all that you’re worrying too much. Your conscience must be raising hell with you, Harry. You don’t have the look of a man that sleeps good. You better sell out and go to a lower altitude and loaf the rest of your life.”

“Thanks, Doc,” I told him, “thanks for giving it to me straight. The liquor I can get along without, and the smoking I can hold down. The eating ain’t the pleasure it used to be, anyways—but to hell with quitting. I been years building up the Big Hat to what it is and I ain’t going to quit now. I’d rather die in the saddle than sit around and whittle the rest of my life. What the hell has a man got to live for if he ain’t doing something?”

“Couldn’t prove it by me, Harry,” Doc Brady said, sorta looking at me like he was seeing me for the first time. “I’m just a cow-town doctor. All I can do is tell you what’s wrong with you and how to check it—but I can’t tell you how to run your life. You know what’s important to you and whether you’d rather live or die.”

“Yeah, I know what’s important,” I told him—and all at once I did. Up until then I don’t believe I had

known. It wasn't me any more, or the Big Hat—it was Skinnymalink, little Annie—the daughter Ann had died giving birth to. It was little Skinnymalink that had grown from a squalling chunk to as pretty a young woman as her mother had been—and with a harder mind than her old daddy.

Yeah—that's what was important—Skinnymalink. I had to hold things together for her, I had to keep the Big Hat going for her and the man she would marry and the kids she would raise. I had to figure it somehow for Skinnymalink. It should have been for her and Jinglebob—but Jinglebob was dead—killed over in Arizona, mixed up in a range war and outlawed and finally killed—all because of my own damned bull-headedness.

“Tell me again what to do, Elmer,” I told Doc Brady, as humble a man as ever ate crow. “Tell me again, Doc—and I'll work her out that way.”

“You got to quit work, Harry,” Brady said, his hardness and gruffness all gone now, like he'd been reading my thoughts. “You've got to quit worrying. You've got to take it easy—and if you can't bring yourself to selling out and going away and whittle then you've got to stay at home and read the *Stockman's Journal* or play chess or something like that. You've got to quit work and you've got to quit worrying.”

“How the hell is a man going to quit worrying?”

“Dunno, Harry. Reckon you’ll have to hire you a little colored boy to worry for you. That’s all I can tell you—and I’ve got nine million other people, old and young and unborn, waiting for me to help ’em out—so move your antique carcass out of here, will you, Harry, and let me get to ’em? ”

“Yeah, Elmer, thanks,” I told him. “Know any good, hard-worrying little colored boys? ”

“Nope, Harry. Come back in two, three weeks and let’s see how things are going. Get this filled down at the druggist’s. Might help you to clear up that rheumatism.”

“Thanks again,” I told him. “Sorta’ keep this under your hat, will you—there’s a lot of coyotes that would start howling around again if they heard I was laid up. Might save me some trouble if nobody learned about it.”

“Hell, I’ll forget you as soon as you walk out of here. Too many folks around here that really amount to something that I got to look after. Probably won’t think of you until I see you again.”

So I left Doc Brady’s kinda down in the mouth, but not yet fully realizing just how stove up I was. It wasn’t until I got up to Mac’s place and downed three, four snorts of forked lightning that it all began to sink in.

It was pretty early in the day and there wasn’t anybody in Mac’s place but himself—the oldest and best

friend I'd ever had, bar none—excepting maybe the Senator.

“ You don't look any too happy, man,” Mac said. “ Anything I could help out on? ”

“ Reckon not, Mac,” I told him. “ Doc Brady says I'm all washed up. Got to ride in a damned buggy—got to stay off horses, and quit drinking your rot-gut and quit smoking and such. Even then maybe I won't live long, he says.”

“ Looks like you might be in for a little trouble, then, Harry,” Mac said. “ Lot of the boys around here don't love you any too much. You been kinda rough with some of them.”

“ Yeah, Mac,” I told him, “ I know that—but that's the way this country works. I got to figure out some way to stay top dog, or else get pulled down.”

“ Folks trying to nail your hide to the bark, old friend? ” the Senator's voice boomed from the door. He came in and sat down by me and threw his arm around my shoulder and I felt better just for having him there. “ Anything you can't handle, Harry, you just call on Mac and me.”

“ Wish it was something you could do for me, Add, I know you'd be happy to do it,” I told him. He was a hell of a fine man, Senator Pearce was, and he would 'a' given me the shirt off his back if he thought I wanted it. “ Doc Brady says I'm all shot to hell, Add. Can't work

any more and look out for my place. Got to sit around the porch and drink weak tea. Got to learn to knit, maybe—like Skinnymalink does.”

“She’s a great gal, Skinnymalink is, Harry,” the Senator said. “You go on and sit on your porch and quit worrying. Mac and me we’ll put our heads together and dope out something.”

“Nice of you, Add,” I said, “but ——”

“No buts, Harry—you just finish your red-eye and go on home. Got to see a man now, but I’ll be back shortly and work out something with Mac so’s you can get a little rest.”

“All right,” I told him, feeling better already. “Can’t picture you forking a horse, though, and snaking steers out of the mud.”

“Never you mind, Harry, never you mind,” the Senator laughed. “I got to tear out of here—but I’ll ride out to the place one of these days soon. Adios.”

“Reckon friends are better than money in the bank, Mac,” I told MacGregor when the Senator was gone.

“Yeah, you’re right,” MacGregor said, looking at me sorta reproving like. “Understand I’m not criticising, Harry—but you always did think a lot more of money than I did. Too much of it gets to be a damned nuisance, sometimes.”

“Yeah,” I said, “like now. Betcha if I had a little place like yours here, I’d be a helluva lot better off.”

"You're going to be all right," Mac said. "Brady he's a pretty good doctor. You do like he says and let things ride a spell and if they don't run to suit you in a couple of weeks or a month then me and Addison will put our heads together and figure a way out. There ain't nothing that you can't overcome if you put your mind to it."

"Thanks, Mac," I told him, feeling relieved as hell that I had two good friends at my back. "Reckon I'll ride along home and start rotting. Here's luck," I said, gulping my drink.

"Here's health, Harry."

So I rode on home, the liquor making a warm glow in me, stirring my blood and making me forget my aches and enemies—in fact the more I thought about things, the better off I felt, having two such good friends to take care of me.

But something must have gone wrong. Somebody must have been listening in at the doctor's office—or somebody must have talked.

About halfway home I met Al Jenkins—the first time I'd seen him on Big Hat land in twenty years.

"Howdy, Mr. Benedict," he said, "don't bother trying to reach for your gun because you'd be dead before your hand got to it."

"Howdy, Al," I said. "What bad luck brings you over this way?"

"Come to do you a favor, Mr. Benedict," Al Jenkins said, laughing in my face. "I know a lot of the boys. They'll leave you alone if I say so."

"You got me over a barrel, Al," I told him—seeing an easy answer to my troubles but pretending I wasn't too damned interested from the start. I knew it was going to cost me—but I didn't know how much.

"You making any money these days?" Jenkins asked.

"Yeah—we sell a little stock now and then. Not so bad."

"Maybe around twelve, fifteen hundred head a year?" Al asked.

"Yeah, Al—but it ain't all clear profit, you know. There's help and taxes and grub and all. Nets around twenty-four, twenty-five thousand."

"Yeah—that's about what I figured."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." Al Jenkins sneered. "Better half a loaf than none, Mr. Benedict. I ain't forgetting you did me a favor once and didn't kill me. But I ain't forgetting you chased your son away from my daughter either. If he'd 'a' married her like he wanted to do I'd be helping you for nothing—but it's going to cost you half of what you make to keep the wolves off of you."

"How you want it paid?" I asked, knowing it was a good deal. I didn't need all I was making and it was

better to make half and quit worrying like Doc Brady said.

"You like to gamble, Harry," Al Jenkins said. "So once a month you go into Ravenhill's and lose a thousand bucks."

"Any way you say, Al."

"That's the best way," Al Jenkins said, pleased as hell with how easy things were going for him. "Lose it at Tiny McBride's roulette wheel—and the money will end up in the right hands and there won't be no checks or evidence of anything."

"All right, Al," I told him. "In a way I'm thankful to you. You got me out of a spot. How'd you get on to things, Al?"

"You'll likely never know, Mr. Benedict," Al Jenkins laughed. "Hope I never see you again alive. Adios."

So I paid off regular for four, five months and took life easy and began to feel my strength coming back. Reckon things would have run on that way indefinitely and I might have got well again if two things hadn't of happened.

The first one was that Skinnymalink noticed that I was gambling too much.

And the second one was that rustling dropped off to absolutely nothing on the Big Hat! And when there ain't no rustling on a ranch things ain't right! It was a

normal, natural thing—and when it stopped folks began to notice it!

Borger of the Cattleman's Association called on me with blood in his eyes and a gun in his hand—and hard words on his lips! Yes sir—I was in a spot that day when Borger rode up and accused me of being hand in glove with the rustlers—and asked to see my tally book!

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“You won’t join the association, Harry,” Borger said, “you won’t join us to wipe out the rustling . . . and you ain’t losing any stock to speak of yourself—everybody’s saying so and your tally book proves it. And you ain’t got any fancy gun-slingers guarding your boundaries, watching your stock.”

“So? ” I asked.

“So, there’s only one thing left for us to believe,” Borger said, his hands on his guns. “You’re hand in glove with the Jerktown bunch . . . you’re all mixed up with the rustlers yourself. You’re a crook, Benedict, just like your son that got jailed over in Arizona. You’re just another damned rustler yourself, Harry Benedict.”

There was a time when a man couldn’t have called me names like that and lived ten seconds. Even stove up like I was I should have shot it out with him. But I couldn’t. Some of what he said was right . . . so I stalled along.

“Anybody but you, Borger,” I told him, “couldn’t

talk to me that way. But I've known you a long time, and I know there ain't a mean streak in you. You believe what you're saying, you think you're right. Got any proof? "

" No, but it all stands to reason."

" Get some proof, Borger. Get some hard cold facts—before you go popping off again like that. I won't take it from you another time. Get your proof and come back with your gun out . . . or eat your words, Borger."

Reckon I kinda bluffed him out a little. He looked at me kinda funny and said, " Maybe I done you an injustice, Harry. Could be. And I know that it ain't because you're afraid that you ain't going for your gun. But I'm going to keep my eyes open. Times change and folks change and there are things that will bear looking into. There's got to be some good reason why you won't join the association—and why you ain't losing stock when everybody else is—and I aim to find out. So long, Benedict."

" So long, Borger," I said; " remember what I told you. I'm an old man and learning to be patient—but either prove something the next time or keep your trap shut."

It was one of the hardest things I ever did, taking all that talk from Borger. I never was a man to dodge a fight—in my younger days I would have had my gun

out and started shooting and to hell with the odds. But there I was—crippled with rheumatism and not able to beat anybody to the draw—so I had to take it.

And I didn't even have one good gun-fighter on the place. What I wouldn't have given to have Jinglebob back that day—he was pretty handy with his guns, Jinglebob was—but then if I'd had Jinglebob I'd never have done the things that led up to what Borger had to say that day. Jinglebob would have been running the place right, with a good tough outfit that could handle the rustlers.

To hell with Al Jenkins, I thought—to hell with Al and his harum-scarum daughter, Jennifer. I should have killed Al twenty years back—and then there would have been no Jerktown gang and no Jennifer Jenkins and I'd still have my boy and fewer troubles.

But I didn't kill him—and he had me by the short hair and he knew it. It wasn't but three or four days that I ran into Al Jenkins on the way back from town. He looked at my buckboard and sorta sneered at me. "Nice team you got there, Mr. Benedict. Hope they're nice and gentle."

"Hello, Al," I said. "Whose stock you rustling these days?"

"Wouldn't you like to know, Mr. Benedict," Jenkins said, "wouldn't you like to prove something on me, though?"

"Farthest thing from my mind, Al."

"Yeah, I know," Al Jenkins laughed. "You wouldn't be able to sleep nights if I got hung or shot or jailed or something—you'd be so broken up. Nice of you—and I appreciate it. Just to show you how much I appreciate it I ain't going to tell Borger about you working with us low-down rustlers."

"You got me over a barrel, Al," I told him, "but don't try to crowd your luck too far."

"Hell, you've been trying to have me hung for years," Al Jenkins said, "and you thought your son was too damned good for my daughter. You're right there—but I don't relish being told so. Yeah—I got you over a barrel, Benedict, and by hell you're going to pay. Two thousand a month, or you get run out of the country by Borger and his crowd. I would make it more only that's about all you can stand without going broke—and you wouldn't be any good to me broke."

"All right, Al," I told him, not being able to do anything about it. "I'll go in and lose two thousand on Tiny's wheel, first of each month, just like I've been doing."

"See you in hell, Benedict," Al said as he rode away.

If that isn't a pretty kettle of fish, I thought, as I drove on home. Every damned ranch in the Big Hat Basin except the Senator's had joined Borger's Cattleman's Association—and they were all trying to prove

I was mixed up with the bad bunch. And now the rustlers were doubling their price on me—two thousand dollars a month—leaving me operating money and little more. If there wasn't hell to pay and no pitch hot then my name wasn't Harry Benedict. But I didn't know what trouble was until I got home!

No sir—association and rustlers could be handled, they could be fought off or dealt with—but the law you can't budge, and it was the law I found stacked up against me when I got home. Skinny McGrew had just got back from Dos Rios with a load of supplies and mail . . . and the weekly *Dos Rios Gazette*. It was plastered all over the front page!

“Forty New Families Move to Big Hat Basin!”

Forty new families had moved to the Big Hat Basin—and homesteaded forty sections along the Rio Grande River!

They'd filed on all my water—and they'd got an injunction from the Federal Court in Santa Fe restraining me from taking any steps to change the course of the Rio Grande until its natural, normal course had been duly investigated by the court.

I was up molasses creek for sure—nearly nine years back a landslide in The Gorge—the narrow neck where the Rio Grande came through the mountains—had changed its course. The river now ran a mile to two miles away from the river-front land I'd bought from

the Senator's railroad. My water had moved away from where I owned it—but I was running the Basin then and I hadn't done a damned thing about it. Yes sir—I was up the creek for sure.

It was gone—the water I'd fought for and raised hell for and ruined all the little ranchers for. It was all in the hands of a lot of lousy nesters—farmers from Iowa or Kansas, I reckon—and all I had left was a few springs that dried up in hot weather and the little trickle of water, the Rio Chico that ran into the Rio Grande at Dos Rios. I had enough water for one cow in ten—and I was sunk, come hot weather. There wasn't a damned thing I could do about it.

A man can't fight the law.

"Take it easy, Dad," Skinnymalink said when she saw me looking off into space after reading the paper. "There are ways out of everything. These nesters won't last, maybe. Or you might be able to buy a few of them out. Something will turn up."

"Yeah, Sis," I told her, not believing a damned word of what I was saying, "something will turn up. We aren't licked, Kid. Where'd you get that new dress you're wearing?"

"That?" she asked. "That came from the mail order house, Dad. Every good-looking woman in Chicago is wearing a dress like this, the way they tell it. You like it?"

" Seems kinda on the red side, Sis," I told her. " But red's a good color for you. How'd you like to live in California, anyway? "

" Whatever you like, Dad." Skinnymalink said and went on about her business just like she didn't know I was up to my ears in trouble, bless her heart.

I got me out a couple of the big black cigars that Doc Brady said I shouldn't smoke and a bottle of the red-eye that Doc Brady said I shouldn't drink and went out on the porch to do a little plain and fancy thinking. I pulled off my boots and cocked my feet up on another chair and let my mind go to work—let it run 'way back twenty years, over people and what they'd done to me and what I'd done to them and why and wherefore. Yes sir, I sat down and did some mighty fancy weighing of facts—for *all at once it had occurred to me that Al Jenkins was doing a job somebody else had sent him to do!*

Somebody was using Al Jenkins, and somebody was sicking Borger on me, and somebody had got those damned nesters all together in a bunch to starve to death while they stole my water rights. Somebody smart as hell, that knew the Big Hat Basin inside and out, was gunning for me—but why? What the hell did I have that they wanted? Who were they—and how was I going to stop 'em? That's what I had to figure out. Just paying off to Al Jenkins wasn't going to do it—I could

see that clear—I had to find out who it was and what they wanted!

So I sat there on the porch where Ann and I had sat so many nights when we were first married—when Mac-Gregor used to come out and bring his best fifteen-year-old Scotch whiskey and Addison Pearce used to sit and tell me what a lucky man I was and that he would have married her himself if I hadn't. I sat there on that porch that was packed with a million memories and tried to live it all over again and see what I had done to who that was paying off bad now!

Hell, there must be twenty, thirty men that wouldn't mind seeing me broke, I thought. You can't build up the biggest damned ranch in the territory by saying, "Excuse me, mister, if you aren't using this water hole this week do you mind if I let my cows water here?" Hell no—you move in with your men and you build a camp and you throw in your stock around it while your hands are homesteading the sections that control the water. That was the way I'd run Overton of the Crown brand back up into the hill country—I'd grabbed his water holes and fenced 'em, way back when I was just getting going good.

We'd had a hell of a fight over it—but when my boys had proved up on their claims and signed 'em over to me the law was on my side and Overton had to get out.

And then I'd bought the river front land—forty sec-

tions of it—and I didn't let any but Big Hat cattle use it. All the little fellows that ran their stock on the open land in the Big Hat Basin had to get out—ten or twelve of them. Some of them found springs and creeks in the hills like Overton did—but some of them went broke, too. Sold their stock for next to nothing—and three or four of them came gunning for me and I maimed a couple of them. Those were the hard days and you had to be tough or get run out yourself—a weakling didn't have a chance—but it looked like my chickens were coming home to roost.

My conscience was clear! I hadn't broke any laws or hadn't froze out anybody that wouldn't have froze me out if they could—I'd just played the game harder and heavier than the other jiggers had and got to be top dog.

My conscience was clear—but that didn't keep somebody that had a grudge against me from closing in on me when he knew I was down and couldn't fight back.

The question was—who? Who had brains enough to play all those different things against me—Al Jenkins and his rustling, Borger and his Cattleman's Association, the nesters and their injunction? Who wanted to ruin me—and why? Were they just plain mean and wanted to get even—or did they want something I had?

I sat there and thought and thought—and figured and argued with myself—and I didn't get anywhere.

The whiskey didn't help and the cigars didn't help—I couldn't see it. A child of three should have been able to figure it—but I was too near the forest to see the trees.

Finally I corked my bottle and threw my cigar away and gave up. Tomorrow is another day, I decided—tomorrow I'll go and see MacGregor and Addison Pearce and tell 'em all about it and get them to help me.

Friendship is a great thing, I thought—tomorrow I'll go and see my two best friends and get their help. Yes sir—friendship is a great thing, I decided—but *I never dreamed that a man's friendship can be so divided that he'll keep his mouth shut and not say a word while one of his friends robs another of his friends, just because he's obliged to both of 'em and feels he can't put his hand in the game!*

It all should have been as plain as the nose on my face the next day when I went to talk with Mac and Addison—but I didn't understand all the meaning of what was said to me. I trusted 'em both!

I went on into Dos Rios bright and early the next day to see the two jiggers I grew up with—MacGregor and Pearce—knowing they'd tell me what they thought and do what they could to get me out of the hole I was in. It was a nice comforting feeling to have two guys like them to go to—guys that didn't have any axes to grind where I was concerned.

Senator Pearce was sitting in MacGregor's bar when I got to town, with four or five traveling bags and a good-looking English overcoat a-setting by the door. Quite a dude in his old age, the Senator was.

"Come to see me off, Harry?" he asked, pouring me a snort from his damned bottle of Scotch that Mac always kept for him. Never could stand the stuff, myself—tasted like a cross between coal oil and sheep dip—but I swilled it down for old times' sake and all that malarkey.

"Nope, Add," I told him, "I didn't even know you were leaving, and if I had I wouldn't ride across the street to see you off. Give me a slug of rye, will you,

Mac, to take the taste of this coyote poison out of my mouth? ”

“ We’ll all have one together, Harry,” the Senator said. “ Here’s regards—here’s to whatever you’re interested in most.”

I threw mine down my throat and sat there while it burned away the tightness of my nerves—and I rolled some dice around absent-mindedly for a while without saying anything—and Mac finally horned into my thinking.

“ You ain’t never been back to us to help you iron things out, my friend,” Mac said, shaking his head, “ so maybe things have straightened out a little for you. On the other hand you been here ten minutes and you haven’t done any bragging yet—you haven’t told us how good your calf crop is or what you told the Cattleman’s Association to go and do to themselves. So I know things ain’t going right, Harry. Let’s have it straight. If it’s money, I always got a little here in the till.”

“ Thanks, Mac,” I told him, hardly knowing where to begin. “ Reckon I’m in a hell of a mess.”

“ You’ve been in a lot of messes that I can remember, Harry, and always got out of ’em somehow or other.”

“ This one’s different,” I told him. “ This is the Big King Pin of all messes, the Old Granddaddy—it’s got me in a corner where I can’t see any way out. I’m way out on a limb, Mac—and somebody’s sawing off the

limb. I already told you that Doc Brady hung me up to dry—and somebody has smelled it and got the wolves to closing in on me.”

“You ain’t using your head,” MacGregor told me, like he was talking to a three-year-old. “This Doc Brady—he’s a smart man, Harry.”

“So?” I asked.

“So he told you to get a little colored boy to do your worrying for you—but you thought he was poking fun at you, didn’t you?”

“Yeah—he was, wasn’t he?” I asked.

“No, he wasn’t, Harry,” MacGregor said, being patient as all hell with me. “He was telling you to take it easy and hire you somebody to do what you couldn’t do. He only said to get a little colored boy to do your worrying for you—but what he really meant was—*get a big colored boy to do your fighting for you!* Get you a smart, rough, tough son-of-a-gun and let him fight it out for you!”

“Guys like that don’t grow on bushes,” I said.

“I know the right man,” MacGregor said, pouring out a slug of scotch for the Senator and rye for me—and a short drink of cold tea he kept in a whiskey bottle to drink when customers insisted he have a drink with ’em. “I know just the man—if he’ll take the job. Knows the cattle business inside out—knows range wars and trouble backwards and forwards. He’s a gun-

slinger—and he's killed a few men in his time. He could make a spread like yours hang together—and he could go a-gunning for whoever is trying to pull you down—he's smart and could figure it out for you ! ”

“ Sounds like Wesley Hardin, or Billy the Kid,” the Senator horned in.

“ He's durned near that bad, I'll admit,” Mac said. “ He was outlawed over in Arizona, but he got away and he's been working at a job here in New Mexico. I think maybe he's wanting to stay that way . . . just working at a job, but he might have his price. If you like I'll send him a letter and sound him out.”

“ Seems like an idea,” I told him, not much liking it and knowing damned well that Skinnymalink would say thumbs down on hiring a professional gunman ; but not seeing any other way out, I agreed. “ Drop him a line and tell him I'll pay him well. Whatever he wants, if you're sure he can swing it.”

“ You can't do that,” the Senator horned in. “ Don't get me wrong—I'm not saying that you didn't do anything that everybody else used to do when you built up your Big Hat Ranch. Everybody kinda took what they wanted—but those days are over. We've got law and order and you can't go hiring a man to break the laws just to keep your ranch together. You've got to figure out something else, my friend.”

“ The law didn't stop those nesters, Addison, and

they haven't cleaned out the rustlers and the gamblers—why the law has actually helped them damned nesters! What do you mean . . . uphold a law that takes away from me what is mine? That ain't right, either, Addison!"

"Things have changed," Addison said. "They aren't what they used to be. We got a railroad, and we got water in our houses, and we got law and order . . . and pretty soon we're going to be a State instead of just a Territory. You can't stand in the way of progress. Those nesters as you call 'em have got a right to be here, the law says so, and they've got their land legal."

"Yeah, maybe so," I told him knowing he was right but not liking it. "They're here legal, maybe, but every damned nester that's been around before has helped himself to my beef and squawked like hell when my stock ate his few measly ears of corn. There was ways of running them out then, and they can still be discouraged."

"Have it your way," Addison said, sorta sorry for me that I couldn't see progress in the same light that he could, I reckon. "Do whatever you think best, but you'll wind up behind the eight ball if you go bucking Uncle Sam."

"It won't be me bucking Uncle Sam," I told him. "It will be some guy I hire, some professional hell-raiser that will run off the guys that are trying to pull

me down and keep me from living my last years in peace. Try and see it my way, Add."

"I'm trying to make you see what's good for you," Addison said, and he sounded like he meant it. "Neither of us was born yesterday . . . and you aren't pulling one little bit of wool over my eyes with your talk of peace. You're out to run those nesters off, and bust up the Cattleman's Association and keep on compromising with the rustlers so they'll not steal as much from you as they do from the guys you don't like. Your whole theory was good back in the days when there wasn't any law, but things are a lot different now . . . and you'll just lose out in the long run. It's your interests I've got at heart, Harry, and you know it."

"Admitting you're right, for the sake of argument," I said, with my fingers crossed, "how do I get out of the mess I'm in—and still stay right with the law? Do I have the sheriff go and shake his fingers at the rustlers, and tell the nesters please don't eat my beef or I'll tell the teacher on them? And how the hell do I get my water back, Addison? "

"There's two ways you can do it," the Senator said. "You can put down some wells, maybe, or you can build a few tanks to catch the rain water, you can buy watering privileges from the nesters on the river front . . . or you can sell out and forget it. Consider-

ing the shape you're in I believe that would be the best thing to do. You might live longer."

"Who the hell wants to live longer so he can sit around and whittle?" I snorted at him. "You guys have both known me a long time . . . What the hell fun would I get out of living and not doing anything? And why should I throw away what I've been building up all my life? I'd rather die tomorrow doing the things I like—than whittle for a hundred years."

"You're missing the main point," MacGregor said. "We're all getting along in years, we've seen the Elephant and heard the Owl. But you've got a daughter—a damned pretty one, and a damned nice one. She's a good girl, Skinnymalink is—and it's what's going to happen to her is what you got to think about. You've got to forget a lot of the things *you* want to do so that you'll be around to look after *her* longer. Maybe Addison's advice ain't so bad; likely you could get a tidy sum for the Big Hat."

"Maybe I could, Mac," I told him, "maybe I could; but she wouldn't be happy in a city. She's a ranch girl."

"She's young," Addison said; "she could learn. And I know an outfit that might take over your spread. Bunch of eastern dudes that want to invest some money and haven't got sense enough to look for water. Have 'em look you up if you like."

"It's an idea," Mac said, but I could see he didn't

more than halfway agree. "Or, if that don't strike you right, I can send for this Haggarty fellow I was telling you about."

"One at a time, boys, one at a time," I said, not knowing what to say or do. "Reckon if it's Skinnymalink you guys think I ought to look out for maybe I'd better let her decide what she'd rather have me do. If it's her future that decides it, then it's all up to her. I tried running Jinglebob's life for him and made a sorry mess of it and I'll be damned if I'll try and make Skinnymalink range her whole life to suit me if it don't suit her."

"You're talking sense, man," MacGregor said, pouring us out another drink. "Well—here's to the good old days when we were all young—and the fish were bigger and the liquor stronger. Down the hatch."

"Mud in your eye, Mac," I said, "your very good health, Senator."

"Salud," the Senator said.

* * *

Skinnymalink didn't answer right away when I laid all the cards on the table before her. She listened close, without batting an eye when I told her the trouble I was in and she didn't even look surprised or shake her head when I said I'd been paying off to Al Jenkins for protection. She just got out her dad-burned knitting and jabbed away with the needles for a while and

screwed her face up into a lot of ungodly knots, and all at once she started asking questions.

“How long you been paying off to those guys, Dad?”

“Five, six months, I reckon. Maybe a little more, or a little less.”

“You give ’em the money in cash, or a check, or how?”

“It ain’t that easy, Sis,” I told her. “They didn’t want a check, and they didn’t want the cash paid to anybody they could trace. Told me to go into Ravenhill’s once a month and lose a thousand bucks at Tiny McBride’s roulette table.”

“Couldn’t prove a thing then, could we, Dad—just a rich old codger having him a time bucking the wheel, that’s all a jury could see. Do you suppose Ravenhill’s mixed up in it?”

“Could be, Sis,” I told her, “could be. Doubt if Jenkins would be that big a hog, if he was on his own. Of course he’s got a lot of men to split with, but Jenkins never was an ambitious man—just wanted to get by. He don’t like me any, on account of Jinglebob and Jennifer—but I don’t reckon he’d go to all of that trouble to keep me from trapping him. He’d take my word for it if I said I’d keep my mouth shut. Since you mention it, I reckon there’s somebody back of Jenkins. I’ve thought of it some before.”

“ You been paying off because you weren’t able to fight back, huh? ”

“ Yeah.”

“ You’d rather fight than sell out? ”

“ Ain’t got a lot of fight left in me, Sis.”

“ Could the nesters be scared out, without harming any of them? ”

“ They got a right to be here, daughter, according to the law.”

“ Could the law make mistakes, Dad—did they tell you that area was open to homesteading? ”

“ Don’t remember seeing it in the paper or on any notices, but I reckon it’s legal, all right.”

“ Seems like I’ve seen some of ’em in town, and at church and all—they seem to have come from the same part of Missouri. All of ’em know each other, seem like good people. How’d they get so far from home, all in the same place and all at once? ”

“ Looks like somebody had brought ’em out here, Sis.”

“ Yes it does, Dad. Looks like somebody brought ’em out here for a reason, maybe. Somebody that wanted you to go broke, maybe. Looks like this needs some thinking.”

“ Let’s argue it out now and get it over with.”

“ Look, Pop,” she said, serious as hell, looking me square in the eye. “ I was raised in blue jeans. I can ride

a horse with the best of them, and I am no slouch with a six-gun. I finished high school and four years of college and I'm twenty-two years old. I'm healthy as hell, Dad, and I've got sense enough to come in out of the rain."

"Okay, Sis, you're the top hand. What's the verdict, then? "

"We'll fight. We'll work it out together. We'll get this hired killer of Mac's . . . it goes against my finer feelings to do it, but you can't fight fire with a lot of kind words! And it isn't Al Jenkins or the nesters we're fighting, it's some ruthless gent that's after your scalp. You can't blame 'em for that, Dad . . . from what I've heard and what you told me, after it's all put together and discounted seventy-five per cent for natural growth in telling you still weren't any lily in your younger days. There must be some fellow that you took something away from away back yonder and he's been waiting for his chance ever since. And he thinks he's found it, Dad—but let's don't let him get away with it. Let's hire this gun-slinger of Mac's, this high class killer . . . we can keep him in line, and maybe get him to bluff this through for us. It's more our way of doing things than selling out and running. You always did enjoy a good fight, and I've always wanted one. Let's go see this guy. Do us good to take a little trip. Stage travel isn't so bad."

“Hoped that’s what you’d decide, Skinnymalink,” I told her, and I was. It wasn’t my way to run from a fight and I was glad it wasn’t hers. I was kinda proud of my daughter that day! She could have sold out for a tidy sum and never turned a hand the rest of her life—but she chose to fight to keep what was hers from all comers. And I had a sneaking suspicion that she wanted her old daddy to have one last fling in his last days.

“Get the dope from Mac, Sis,” I told her, “and we’ll run over to wherever this professional killer hangs out and see what we can see.”

So I sent Skinny McGrew in to see MacGregor and get the address of the man he had in mind. Next day Skinny came back—and we packed us a bag apiece and set out for Alamogordo to see Haggarty, damn his soul.

☆ 6 ☆

The stage ride was pretty long and tiresome—particularly from Las Cruces over the pass, and Skinny-malink and I had a lot of time to talk. Mostly it was about this Haggarty we were going to see. She was trying her best to see things my way and put herself in my place—but I reckon there's just some things that a man and a woman can't see alike. Particularly where shooting and killing is concerned. She already hated Haggarty—without seeing him or knowing him—just because of him having been an outlaw and a killer. And all the damned questions she could think of to ask —

How old was he? What did he look like? Why was he working in a sawmill in Alamogordo when he was a professional killer? How many men had he killed—and how many sheriffs was he laying low from? Judas Priest—Skinnymalink asked a hell of a lot of questions, none of which I could answer—for all I knew about Haggarty was that he was hell on wheels with his guns and had a mind that worked three jumps ahead of you all the time.

"I hope he's got guts enough to clean out Jerktown, Dad," my daughter said, "instead of letting it fester right under your nose, raising hell and stealing us blind most of the time."

"Such language for a pretty gal," I laughed at her.

"Well, I don't care—that's what they're doing," she said. "It's been a mistake since the start, and you know it—letting outlaws live practically in our own back yard and not doing anything about it."

"Could be, Sis," I told her, halfway agreeing with her, "but since it was my own mistake I sorta stuck up for it."

"If there wasn't any Jerktown there probably wouldn't be any Al Jenkins left in the country—and there wouldn't have been any Jennifer Jenkins anywhere near the Big Hat."

"So?"

"So—if there hadn't been any Jerktown there wouldn't have been any Al Jenkins around and there wouldn't have been any Jennifer around—and we'd still have Jinglebob with us—and he'd be twice the man that this Haggarty we are going to see is! We wouldn't have to monkey with paid killers."

"Yeah, I know all about that, Skinnymalink," I told her, knowing she was right, knowing it was all my fault. "I should have wiped it out twenty years ago—but I didn't. That was about the time you were born and I

was pretty soft-hearted. And I couldn't let Jinglebob marry her, Sis—she's bad medicine."

"You're right, Dad—she's bad medicine. But Jinglebob would still be alive. He wouldn't have got in all the trouble he did—he wouldn't have got sick in the Arizona penitentiary—and he wouldn't have got killed holding the posse off while Johnny Casino was getting away."

"That's one man I'd like to get my hands on—that damned Johnny Casino. Letting Jinglebob get killed while he got away."

"It all goes back to Jerktown," Skinnymalink said, "that's why I want it wiped out."

"Yeah, it all trails back to Jerktown," I told her, weary as a man can be of his own mistakes. "But what's done is done and talking won't help it any."

"Sorry, Dad—I won't mention it again—but if we hire this murderer of Mac's let's have him clean up Jerktown sooner or later—let all the outlaws and scum and riff-raff go somewhere else to raise their hell."

"All right, Sis," I told her, "if it'll make you happy we'll burn the place down and everybody in it."

"I been thinking," Skinnymalink said, her face all screwed up till it looked like a washboard, she had so many wrinkles in it.

"Yeah?"

"Somehow," my daughter said, "I don't feel quite

right about us hiring a murderer. It isn't going to do us any good in the long run."

"It's going to keep us from going broke," I explained to her. "It's going to keep our ranch together, maybe . . . the biggest damned ranch in New Mexico. Anyways, he ain't necessarily a murderer."

"Call him whatever you want to, Dad," she said. "Murderer, hired killer, professional gunman, shooting foreman . . . call him whatever you want to, but it all adds up to the same thing. We're hiring somebody, paying him a stiff price, and he'll probably kill one or two guys before he gets through."

"Maybe they need killing."

"Maybe they do, Dad," she said, "but that's for the law to decide, not you or me or Mr. John Haggarty, or whatever you said his name was. Besides, these men he is going to kill will all have brothers or families or friends . . . and sooner or later they'll pay us back, Dad. We won't be any better off than we are now . . . it will just be more trouble on the books against us."

"What you want me to do . . . give the ranch back to the Indians?"

"Yeah, that's sort of the idea," she said, "or sell it to somebody and go buy a little place somewhere else that's peaceful—we'd at least have our consciences clear!"

"Look," I told her, getting kinda mad, I reckon, but

trying to be reasonable about it all. "A man's got to play things his own way sometimes. Maybe it ain't the right way, but as long as it's the best he can do that's the way he's got to do it. I ain't been able to get around and take care of the ranch like I should. I ain't got Jinglebob to do it for me, like you reminded me—but I ain't going to lose the ranch I spent thirty years building up. And if I gotta pay a lot of crooks to leave me alone for a while and then find a man strong enough to make 'em leave me alone . . . well, that's the way it's going to be!"

"All right, Dad," she said, "I hope you find the right man in this Haggarty. I hope he's hell on wheels if that's what you want. Hope he kills you a rustler every morning for breakfast. But if you're doing it on my account, don't do it—I don't want any part of any hired killers, and I don't want any ranch left to me that has to be kept together that way. I'd rather go work for a living somewheres."

Stubborn little gal she was, but I guess she came by it honestly. Gals are supposed to take after their daddies, and all hell couldn't change my mind once it was made up. I was kinda proud of her, I reckon, and tried to patch things up with her.

"Look, Sis," I told her, "I'm a bullheaded old son-of-a-gun, as you've told me kinda plain in sort of a roundabout way. I'm plain hard-headed, I'll admit, but

I'm trying to see things your way. But you gotta do the same way with me. You've gotta have an open mind. You've gotta consider that you might be wrong and I might be right about the whole thing. You've got to be open-minded and give this here Haggarty a fair trial. Maybe it'll work out, maybe it won't—but let's try it . . . and any time you decide it ain't going the way it should you tell me and I'll fire this Haggarty. Be sure it ain't going right . . . and we'll change it. But let's try it for a while my way, Sis."

"Sure, Dad," she said, "I've been talking too much anyways. You know lots of things I don't know. Anyway, right or wrong, I'm for you. Let's play 'em like they lay then, Dad."

So we rode on in to Alamogordo to see this Haggarty, feeling right close to one another, closer than we had since Jinglebob left; meaning to hire Haggarty . . . and fire Haggarty if he didn't do right.

But Haggarty outfoxed us. He made Skinnymalink so damned mad she made me hire him so's she could have him around to get even with him . . . *and then he fixed it up so I couldn't fire him if I wanted to.*

Yes sir, Haggarty outfoxed us.

☆ 7 ☆

"I've gone out of the killing business," Haggarty told me after he heard my story. "I'm plumb peaceable these days—and I mean to stay that way."

"Offer him more money, Dad," Skinnymalink horned in. "He's just holding out for a higher price and the quicker you pay it the quicker you'll hire him."

"MacGregor told me you were open for a proposition or I wouldn't have bothered you, Haggarty," I said, not wanting to beg anybody to do me a favor.

"Come on, let's get out of here, Dad," Skinnymalink said. "It turns my stomach to see you apologizing to a hired killer."

"If you'll send your fancy woman out to the bar to have a drink," Haggarty sneered, "so that you and I can talk without being interrupted all the time, it could be that we might work out a deal."

"Why you—you—you low-down skunk!" Skinnymalink spluttered, so mad she couldn't talk when it finally soaked into her pretty head what he was calling her.

"Take it easy, Sis," I said—biting my lip to keep from laughing. Skinnymalink had never been called a fancy woman before—although she acted like one sometimes and dressed like one now and then. "Go easy on the corral talk, Sis. This is my daughter, Anne, Mr. Haggarty. Excuse me for not mentioning it sooner."

"I'm sorry, Miss Benedict," Haggarty said in a voice that plainly said he wasn't a damned bit sorry. "I thought ——"

"You thought, you thought ——" Skinnymalink snapped at him, mad as a hornet. "Don't make me laugh, Mr. Haggarty. You haven't had a decent thought in years—maybe never. I doubt if you have anything to think with, even! "

"I was trying to apologize, Miss," Haggarty said, pretending to be humble as all pie, but his own temper was building up a little, too. "I'm sorry for what I said—but you're dressed like one and all painted up like one—but I should have known better. Hell—no fancy woman was ever as bad-mannered as you are—I should have known you were a rich man's daughter."

Skinnymalink was getting a hold on herself now. She was getting cool, pulling herself together—and there was a wicked, poisonous look in her eyes like in a rattlesnake's just before he strikes.

"I think maybe this is the man we need, Dad," she said, biting off her words sharp and clean and strong.

"I think maybe he's mean enough to put this dirty deal over for us."

"I don't believe I'd want to work for you at any price, Mr. Benedict," Haggarty said, laughing at me and my troubles. "I don't reckon I could stand being bossed around by a sharp-tongued little hellcat like your daughter."

"Look, Haggarty," I said, all at once feeling nine years older than Mathusalem, "I need a good man, which MacGregor says you are. I'll shut up and Anne will shut up—and we'll both listen while you tell us what you want to work for us."

"I'll tell you how it is," Haggarty said, relaxing a little and getting the chip off his shoulder a bit, "I been mixed up in these range wars before. I've seen a lot of good men get killed just over a little piece of land or a few cows. I've killed a few myself, for the same reason. I'm getting along pretty good where I am—I ain't broke no laws in this territory and there ain't no sheriffs after me. There's only one thing that would make me change."

"I'll pay you whatever you ask, Haggarty," I told him.

"Yeah," Skinnymalink horned in, "and besides the money you'll have one of the biggest chances in the world—have something that will make you famous. That is if you're any good with your guns, which I

doubt. You'll have a chance to lock horns with Johnny Casino."

"You shut up, Skinnymalink," I yelled at her, "and keep your nose out of this."

"Just from looking at you, Mr. Haggarty," Skinnymalink yelled back, "I'd say you'll kill him all right. You'll potshot him from behind a tree, but he'll be just as dead as if you killed him in a fair fight and folks will forget the bushwhacking after a while."

"What do you know about Johnny Casino, lady?" Haggarty asked, all the expression going out of his eyes and leaving them telling nothing, like the eyes of a man in a poker game when all his chips are down on one hand. "I thought Johnny Casino was dead?"

"Nope, Mr. Haggarty," Anne smirked at him, "Johnny Casino isn't dead. He's as alive as you or I and he's working for Al Jenkins up at Jerktown, and every gun-slinger in the Basin is kow-towing to him. He's building up the Jerktown gang with his old Arizona outfit and raising hell all over the border country."

"How long's this been going on, Sis?" I asked.

"Quite a while, Dad," she said, "but folks been trying to keep it from you figuring you had enough to worry about, I guess."

"Well I'll be damned, I'll be everlastingly damned!" I said—and I should have been. Here I'd been paying

money to Al Jenkins for protection from Johnny Casino, the Arizona outlaw—the guy that had led Jinglebob to his death, and gone off and left him dying, with a posse closing in on him!

“ I’ll take your job on two conditions,” Haggarty said, breaking into my thoughts.

“ Name ’em, Haggarty,” I said.

“ Well, first of all I’ll have to run the deal,” Haggarty said. “ I’ll have to be the guy in the saddle and run it like I see fit.”

“ And the other angle? ” I asked.

“ Secondly, there is the matter of money! ” Haggarty said.

“ Yeah,” Skinnymalink butted in, “ guns come high, huh, Haggarty? ”

“ Nope, not too high, Miss,” Haggarty said, looking her over like a man looks at a prize filly. “ Nope, my guns don’t come very high considering the risk I’ll be running. Two hundred a month, Mr. Benedict,” he said to me.

“ Hell, that’s not much, Haggarty,” I told him, surprised at being let off so cheap by this professional gunman. “ A good foreman gets a hundred, a hundred and twenty-five these days.”

“ Two hundred a month,” Haggarty repeated, “ *two hundred a month for twenty years!* ”

You could have knocked me over with a switch, him

wanting two hundred a month for twenty years—nearly fifty thousand dollars.

“ You got your nerve, Haggarty,” I told him—not knowing what to answer him. It was either hire him or go broke quick—but that much money!

“ Take it or leave it, Mr. Benedict,” Haggarty said like he didn’t give a damn which I did. “ You asked me to work for you—so pay me what I want or shut up. You can put fifty thousand into some good security and let the interest pay me off and still have your money, as far as that goes. And I’ll likely save you more than that in a couple of years, if I live.”

“ And if you don’t live, Haggarty? ” I asked.

“ The two hundred a month goes on just the same; I’ll figure out somebody to leave it to. The old maids’ home, maybe,” Haggarty said, looking at Skinny-malink and laughing. “ I don’t aim to die sudden when this thing is cleared up just to save you a little money, Mr. Benedict.”

“ Why, you low-down son, get the hell out of my room! ” I yelled, mad as hell that he should think I’d have him killed to save a little money later on when I didn’t need him.

“ Tut, tut, Pop,” Skinnymalink said, “ remember your blood pressure. And remember that Mr. Haggarty doesn’t think like you do—killers have to look out for themselves. It’s a good deal he’s offering you, Dad.

Goodness knows you'll go broke the way things are running now."

So I cooled off and took Haggarty's proposition. We got us a lawyer and signed a paper—and we fixed it so the two hundred a month was to be paid to Haggarty's lawyer for a period of twenty years. Haggarty got a copy and I got a copy and that was that.

Haggarty said he'd be along in a week or ten days. "Look for me when you see me, Mr. Benedict," he said. "Reckon I'll drift in like an ordinary cowhand and see what I can see all by myself. Strangers oftentimes can run on to things that home folks miss. Good-bye, Miss Benedict—can't say it's been nice meeting you."

Skinnymalink was pretty quiet on the way home, and I was tired and dozed a lot of the way.

Once she nudged me and woke me up and said, "Looks like maybe we got out-talked, Dad."

"How's that, Sis? "

"This Haggarty is smarter than he looks! I think he called me a fancy woman on purpose."

"Why would he want to do that? "

"So I'd get so mad I'd make you hire him."

"Why would you make me hire him? " I wanted to know, not following her mind, it jumped so fast.

"So he'd be around where I could rub his nose in it when I figured out some way to get even with him. Yep, I think this Haggarty is pretty sly, Dad."

And she was right. Haggarty was as sly a son-of-a-gun as ever drew breath—and hell broke loose in the basin when the news leaked out that I'd hired him.

How it leaked out I don't know—for nobody knew it but me and Haggarty—and MacGregor. Senator Pearce was back in Washington and couldn't have known!

The more I thought about Haggarty the less I trusted him—and by the end of a week I didn't trust him one damned bit. So I sent Bill Pell in to Dos Rios to watch for him and see who he talked to and get a first-hand report of what he did when, as and if he did show up. It being the first of the month I gave Bill Pell the regular two thousand bucks for him to lose at Tiny McBride's roulette table down in Ravenhill's place. Bill had done it a time or two before when I didn't feel up to going to town and they got so they sorta looked for him or me once a month!

Bill Pell was a good honest cowhand that worked hard and took care of my property like it was his own and knew enough to keep his mouth shut, but I reckon he wasn't overly bright. I didn't think to tell him what Haggarty looked like and Bill didn't think to ask me—reckon he thought a man would ride up with a sign on him saying "I'm Haggarty" or something. Anyway I didn't tell him what Haggarty looked like and there was hell to pay because of it.

I wasn't there to see what went on, but here's how I put it together from what other folks told me and what Bill Pell reported.

Seems like Bill enjoyed losing my money better than I did—so he didn't go direct to Ravenhill's the first night he was in Dos Rios. He fooled around the saloons and pool-halls three, four days, having him a time—and saving the losing of the two thousand bucks up for one big night just before he came home. Kinda like a kid saving his candy, I reckon.

Somebody must have told Tiny McBride, or whoever was behind this pay off deal they'd worked on me, that I'd hired Haggarty—and McBride must have decided that since I'd hired Haggarty I wasn't going to pay 'em their two thousand any more.

So McBride sends for Al Jenkins and some of his boys, and they showed up in Dos Rios about the fourth or fifth night Bill Pell was in town, with blood in their eyes.

They were all down at Ravenhill's fretting around—figuring out what to do, I reckon, when Bill Pell walks in, innocent as a lamb, and starts playing roulette at Tiny McBride's wheel.

Bill enjoyed his gambling big. One time he'd play the flags all evening—the Mexican and the American one after the other. Next time he'd stick to the sevens and the elevens—or even the unlucky thirteens. This

night he chose to play the red one time and the black the next, just like a clock.

Bill Pell would put ten dollars on the red, and the ball would land in the black and Tiny McBride was so relieved that he raked in Bill Pell's money and paid off the other betters, if they'd won—without ever noticing Haggarty!

Haggarty must have been a quick thinker! Reckon he'd asked around and found out who Bill Pell was and guessed that he was paying off for me, through Tiny McBride's roulette table.

So Haggarty eased up to the table, bought some chips and started placing his bets just opposite of Bill Pell's. Tiny McBride was so interested in collecting Bill Pell's two thousand dollars that he didn't even notice that Haggarty won every time Bill Pell lost—he just shoved out the chips to the winners and raked in Pell's losings.

Haggarty must have seen that Tiny McBride was missing what was going on—so he started raising his bets. When Bill Pell would put ten on the black, Haggarty would put twenty-five on the red. And when Bill Pell put fifty on the red, Haggarty would put a hundred on the black.

Bill Pell was finally down to his last hundred, and I guess he was getting tired of losing my money, so he decided to shoot it all at one time and get it over with

and bet a hundred bucks on the red! Al Jenkins was standing by the table with two of his boys watching his money being taken in—looking pleased and relaxed with it all, watching Bill Pell play and lose. None of them even seemed conscious of Haggarty's presence—and Haggarty eased out a thousand dollars' worth of chips on the black.

The wheel spun and the little ball bounced around and settled down on the black half of twenty-one, just as pretty as you please.

"Well, guess that cleans me out, Tiny," Bill Pell said. "Looks like I just can't pick 'em very good tonight."

"Sure does, stranger," Haggarty told him. "Reckon I'll cash in myself and buy you a drink at the bar. That'll be two thousand on this spin, mister," he said to McBride, "and about three more on these chips."

McBride looked at him for the first time, just like Haggarty hadn't been playing all evening. "Well, I'll be damned, I'll be double damned," he said. "I lose five thousand dollars winning two."

"Yeah, I guess you're not very bright," Haggarty said, counting his money and tucking it in his overalls pocket. "You've lost more than that. That last hundred you took from this jigger here is the last Big Hat dollar you'll ever take on your crooked wheel."

"You insinuating I'm a crook?" McBride said in a

hard cold voice that had scared out many a half-drunk puncher.

"Insinuating, hell," Haggarty said. "I'm telling you plain, right to your face—that's the crookedest damned roulette wheel I ever saw. No straight wheel works like that one did tonight!"

Al Jenkins went for his gun—his two boys went for their guns—and Tiny McBride went for his—but Haggarty's was faster. Haggarty shot Al Jenkins through the gun arm and the others didn't finish their draw. They raised their hands over their heads, and Al Jenkins held his arm to stop the bleeding.

Al Jenkins' daughter, Jennifer, who had been watching, looked and marveled and said:

"That's quick shooting, stranger—Dad hasn't been beat in years."

"Sorry if I had to shoot your father, Miss," Haggarty said, "but it was my life or his arm getting a little hole in it that'll heal up in a week or two. My name's Haggarty. I'm the new foreman out at the Big Hat."

"I am Jennifer Jenkins," Jennifer said, "not a very nice person, if rumors are true, and daughter of the man who is supposed to be the worst outlaw in the territory, although nobody can prove it. You probably won't be seeing much of me, though—you being at the Big Hat."

"You really Haggarty?" Bill Pell asked, his mouth hung open a foot he was so surprised.

"Yeah, I'm Haggarty," Haggarty told him, holstering his right gun, but still keeping the left one on McBride and Jenkins and his boys. "You got anything to say about it?"

"Yeah, I have," Bill Pell said to him, "so you'll quit talking to that damned whore and ——" But that's as far as he got. Haggarty's right caught Bill Pell under the chin and knocked him end over appetite. Bill Pell just sat where he lit and looked at Haggarty and never said another word.

"Excuse him, Miss," Haggarty said. "Likely he ain't been raised right and don't know no better."

"Nice of you to take up for me," Jennifer said, "but you don't know much about me. Don't be too hard on Bill. Evening, Red," she said to Ravenhill, who'd just come strutting up, the cocky little son.

"Evening, Jennifer," Ravenhill said. "Put your gun away, friend—we don't permit any shooting here."

"The hell you say," Haggarty told him. "I'll draw my gun where I see fit, anywhere or anytime I get shot at or think I'm going to."

"I said put your gun away, friend, and I mean it," Ravenhill told Haggarty, looking him square in the eyes—hard and cold and mean Ravenhill was, even in the face of Haggarty's gun.

Haggarty looked back just as straight and hard as Ravenhill, his eyes probing, searching, wondering what Ravenhill had, I reckon, that made him so sure of himself. And slowly Haggarty's gun lowered and slid into its holster—and Haggarty showed a yellow streak, bluffed out by Ravenhill who didn't even have a gun in sight.

"All right," Haggarty said, laughing and trying to cover up his being scared, "reckon I can afford to eat a little crow. I've won enough money on your crooked roulette wheel. Set 'em up for the house, bartender."

"You interest me strangely," Ravenhill said, looking at Haggarty like he'd just remembered something. "You look like an intelligent man, you don't look like you'd call a wheel crooked so long as you were winning. I think perhaps you'd better withdraw that statement, friend—if you want to live."

"All right," Haggarty said, backing water again, "if you say it ain't crooked, then it ain't crooked. I apologize all to hell."

"Let us say you were mistaken, Haggarty," Ravenhill said, not batting an eye. "Everybody makes mistakes. Join me in a drink—we've some excellent Irish whiskey that just came in."

So Ravenhill and Haggarty had a drink together just like all was forgiven and they were the best of friends. Maybe they were—but the mark was left on

Haggarty. He'd backed down from Ravenhill—and he was marked as yellow-bellied all through the basin! And it didn't do him any good as foreman of the Big Hat.

Particularly next day when he shot poor Barney Collins, the swamper, in the Gem Saloon.

Barney was a little bit queer, but harmless as a coot, and couldn't hit the side of a barn. He was always getting crazy notions about being followed and persecuted by folks that were "after him"—and when he laid eyes on Haggarty the next night he pulled his gun on him! Haggarty should have taken it away from him, but he didn't—he just shot Barney Collins square between the eyes.

The coroner's jury ruled it was self-defense—but everybody knew it was just a useless killing—just a murder by a man that had lost something the night before and was bolstering up his ego!

No sir—Haggarty didn't find "Welcome" on the door mat for him—at the Big Hat ranch or anywhere in the whole damned basin.

Parson Rafferty in Dos Rios preached a sermon condemning him. The Ladies' Aid Society passed a resolution not to eat any more Big Hat beef. The nesters organized a Protective Association. The boys in the bunkhouse started getting their gear together and figuring up their pay. Even Skinnymalink sniffed when she heard about it.

“Jennifer Jenkins, of all people,” she said. “He finds things out quick, doesn’t he, Dad?”

Yes sir—it looked like I’d bought me a pig in a poke, when I hired Haggarty. Particularly the next day when he damned near wrecked my whole outfit!

Bill Pell come in to tell me all about it the next morning after Haggarty killed Barney Collins. Bill had got in early, with a jaw swollen up like he had a toothache, where Haggarty had hit him—and he waited down at the bunkhouse for me to show up and tell me all about it.

“Looks like you done hired you a grade-a, first quality louse, boss,” Bill told me. “Don’t reckon I’m gonna want to work around here with a jasper like him ramrodding the place. Better be figuring up my time and let me have what’s coming to me . . . less the twenty bucks you advanced me a couple weeks back.”

“What seems to be the trouble, Bill?” I asked, expecting maybe that he’d heard about Haggarty having been an outlaw or something like that.

“Why, that low-down dirty son,” Bill said, sore as a boiled owl. “He ain’t no more a man than that red heifer Maria’s got penned up to milk. He just ain’t a man that’s all . . . You should have heard the way Ravenhill talked to him and this Haggarty just said,

‘I’m sorry, I must have been wrong, excuse me, Mr. Ravenhill.’ Hell, he ain’t got the guts of a prairie dog, that damned Haggarty. Your good help’s all going to quit you when they hear about him, and killing Barney Collins that way—hell, everybody knows Barney didn’t mean no harm.”

“Could be that Haggarty didn’t know it,” I said, trying to see both sides of it.

“Could be,” Bill Pell said, shaking his head like he didn’t want any part of Haggarty. “But if he’s such a hell-a-miler with his guns, why’d he back down from Ravenhill when Red didn’t even have a gun in sight?”

“You got me there, Bill,” I said.

“Yes sir,” Bill Pell said, “this here Haggarty is a low-down son, boss. He ain’t got the guts of a prairie dog. Either he’s yellow all the way through or else he’s in cahoots with the wild bunch. He stinks, boss, and I’ll tell it to him to his own face.”

“You won’t have to say it again, Pell,” Haggarty said, standing in the bunkhouse door where he’d been listening all the time, his thumbs hooked in his gun belt. Likely he’d come cat-footing up the way he did, walking light as a panther, and had heard every word that was said.

Bill Pell wheeled around, his hand streaking for his gun. Now Bill Pell was no slouch with a six-shooter—he was faster than most—but Haggarty let Pell get his

gun clear of the holster and then shot it out of Pell's hand before Pell could snap his hammer back. So fast you couldn't see it, Haggarty's draw was.

"Don't any of you other guys get any ideas," Haggarty said, two guns on the rest of the boys in the bunkhouse. "On second thought you better unbuckle your belts and let 'em drop to the floor. You can throw 'em out the window, Pell—you ain't hurt none. Your hand's likely a little numb, that's all."

Pell looked at Haggarty kinda strange like—as if he couldn't believe what he'd just seen, but suspecting that he'd just missed hearing Gabriel blow by a split hair. Pell picked the guns up slow, sorta like a fighter getting up from a nine count and clearing his head by shaking it—and threw the boys' guns out the window. When he was all through Haggarty unbuckled his own guns and handed them to me.

"Hold these a while for me, will you, Mr. Benedict? I want to have a little talk with these boys and see if I can reason with 'em without bringing undue pressure. I want 'em to make up their own minds without having anything forced on 'em." Haggarty took off his coat, unbuckled his spurs and tossed his hat in an empty bunk. He didn't look so big with his guns gone!

"You jiggers just heard what Bill Pell said," Haggarty told 'em, his voice hard and cold and mean as hell. "And what he said about what I did is all true. He

stuck right close to the facts—and whatever he thinks about it is his own business. But just because he thinks I'm a sorry son don't necessarily make me one."

Haggarty was rolling up his sleeves all the time he was talking, and the boys could see what he was building up to, and an unholy gleam got in their eyes.

"I been hired to run this ranch," Haggarty went on, biting off his words sharp and quick, "and I'm going to do it the way I see best. If I want to fight I'm going to fight, and if I want to hide my head in the sand I'm going to hide it. And if I want to ride home in the moonlight with Jennifer Jenkins I'm going to do it—and it's none of your damned business. You jiggers just work here—you do what you're told and draw your pay and keep your mouths shut."

"You're wrong there, Haggarty," Pell told him. "I don't work here any more. I done quit."

"Me too," horned in Bud Price. "There's easier ways of making forty bucks a month than working for a sidewinder like you're stacking up to be. So I quit, as of this minute."

"Have it your own way, boys," Haggarty said. "How about the rest of you?"

"Reckon I'll collect my wages and travel," Hank Morgan said. "Reckon I couldn't stand the smell more'n a day or two a week and I wouldn't feel right about taking wages for being sick to my stomach all the

time." And the other three boys indicated they'd collect and ride on, too.

"Seems to be unanimous," Haggarty sneered at 'em, "but I can't see as it will be any great loss to the Big Hat. Hell, from the looks of you all six couldn't do one man's work between you. Hell, I could do all you boys do in the morning and go fishing right after lunch."

"Yeah," Bill Pell snorted, "you're a regular section gang all by yourself when it comes to work. And I'll betcha you could whip all six of us, with one hand tied behind you, without even messing up your purty black curls?"

"I wouldn't go quite so far as to say that, exactly," Haggarty laughed, "although it's probably just as you say. But I only play the cinches. I only bet the sure things. I'll bet that none of you can get by me and out this door! I'll double what's owed to any man that does it—and those that don't lose their pay! That's with both hands free, of course. I ain't running any unnecessary risks."

"What are we waiting on, boys?" Bill Pell asked, shucking his coat and heading for Haggarty. "Everything goes, Haggarty, so don't swallow or you'll swallow your teeth."

"Come and get it, Pell," Haggarty yelled at him. "Better let Benedict know where to ship your remains."

He was cool and calm and laughing at them, Haggarty was—his eyes cold as blue ice and the line of his jaw as strong as a steel trap. Bill Pell aimed a mean kick at Haggarty's groin, but Haggarty side-stepped it, and the force of Pell's kick threw him off his balance so Haggarty could ram his shoulder into Pell's chin. It sounded like a mule kicking the planks off a gate when Haggarty's shoulder hit him.

"Timber," yelled Haggarty as Pell flopped over on his back. "Come on, you low-down sons! Who's next?"

Hank Morgan and Bud Price looked at each other and nodded—they fought together before and knew how to bring the big boys down—and rushed him both at once! Haggarty let them come on, getting up a good momentum behind them, looking like a couple of battering rams knocking down a wall—but instead of a wall they got Haggarty's feet in their faces. Haggarty hung on to the door jamb with his hands, brought his knees up under his chin and then straightened his legs out, catching them both smack on the button, as neat as I ever did see it done by a wrestler on the ropes.

"Two more down and three to go now, boys," Haggarty jeered at 'em. "You want to come on in and fight or you want me to come after you and knock your heads together?"

"Try and do it, Orville Johnson." Orville was quite the boy with his fists. "You've been right lucky, but

we've got room to fight in now. You take him from the left, Al, and I'll get him from the right, so's he can't kick us or nothing."

Haggarty stood up to 'em for three or four minutes, slugging it out with both of them—but Orville finally got in a couple of lucky punches and Al Valdespino got in a few good kicks to the belly and Haggarty finally looked limp as a dishrag and scared as hell. He got behind the bunkhouse door—it opened in and was built of heavy post oak and weighed about twenty pounds and looked like good protection.

"We got him, Al," Orville yelled. "Let's go stomp the skunk."

Orville rushed in for the kill, ready to beat Haggarty to a pulp—but Haggarty smacked that heavy post oak door square in Orville's face, knocking him ten feet across the room, end over appetite.

Haggarty was on to Al Valdespino now, quicker than a cat. That limp-as-a-dishrag look he'd been faking was gone. He jabbed short rights to Valdespino's throat, making him breathe like a steam engine. When Valdespino's guard went up, Haggarty pounded him in the belly—and when Al dropped his guard to cover his belly Haggarty smacked him on the chin so hard you could hear the pop of it the full length of the bunkhouse.

"Just one left," Haggarty yelled—his shirt torn

half off of him, blood running down his face and a wild laughing look in his eye. "Run, you-son-of-a-gun, run—or I'll beat you to a pulp."

The one man left was a Mexican—Pancho Aguirre—but he didn't run. He didn't fight, either!

"I am Pancho Aguirre," he said, "and I am not afraid of any man. Not while I have my knife!"

"I am not afraid of your knife, Pancho," Haggarty said. "Come out of your corner, or I'll knock you out."

"The señor does not understand," Pancho said, softly. "It is not that I am afraid to fight, no, señor. But I do not see the good of it. The señor will surely beat me, as he has done the others—but I have no fight with the señor in the first place. There is no need to fight. I am not mad with the señor—so why should I use my strength? I will lose if I do—and Pancho does not like to lose."

"You seem to have a head on you, all right, Pancho," Haggarty told him. "Go on up to the house and get your pay—I'll let you past the door!"

"But I am not quitting, señor," Pancho Aguirre said; "with the señor's permission I will continue to work here."

"With the señor's permission," Haggarty mimicked, "you will get the hell out of the Big Hat before I knock your teeth down your throat!"

"But, señor, I want to stay here, I want to be your friend," Pancho insisted.

"In a pig's eye, Pancho," Haggarty sneered at him. "Take your hand off that knife in your sleeve and git out before I wring your neck—I will not have a man working here that will not fight for his friends. Beat it, Pancho—pronto!"

Pancho looked at Haggarty a couple of seconds, shrugged his shoulders and said, "It is not a good thing, señor, to refuse the friendship of a man like Pancho Aguirre. You will be sorry."

Pancho strutted past Haggarty like a peacock—but when Haggarty cocked back his fist like he was going to use it Pancho ran like a scared rabbit!

Bill Pell laughed like hell from where he was lying on the bunkhouse floor. "I never did like that son-of-a-gun," Bill Pell said. "Glad you run him off. Any special orders for the day?"

Haggarty looked at Bill Pell and Bill Pell looked at Haggarty for a spell, sorta sizing each other up.

"Hell, I could 'a' been wrong about the other things, too," Bill Pell said. "Everybody's wrong one time or another."

"You go right on being straw boss for a spell, Bill, and sorta run the place," Haggarty said. "Sorta keep things moving until I get the hang of the place."

"All right, Mr. Haggarty," Bill Pell said—not

Haggarty, but Mister Haggarty. "Let's get going, boys—got a big day's work ahead of us!"

And that, gentlemen, was the way Haggarty settled the boys in the bunkhouse—giving them all the breaks, going against heavy odds, and proving that he was a damned sight better man than they were. Proving he had guts and wasn't afraid of anything.

Yes sir—that was a good sample of Haggarty, all right. It fooled me, too. I thought maybe he was a pretty brave man after all. Maybe I'd done him wrong, I thought.

It never occurred to me that he needed those boys—that he had to have 'em to run the Big Hat. And I didn't know he'd been a professional fighter and that those boys didn't have a chance, all six of them against his training and experience! It was a sure-fire thing for Haggarty—but he needed 'em and he grand-standed it and he got 'em on his side.

Yes sir, it was a good sample of Haggarty, all right—only I didn't see it in the right light!

Always with an ace in the hole, that was Haggarty. Even when he served notice on the rustlers up in Jerktown to get out or get run out I thought he was a brave man and sure to get killed trying it. But he was sly, Haggarty was—he fooled the rustlers, and he fooled me. And he fooled Skinnymalink too, bless her heart!

☆ 10 ☆

Haggarty wasn't around much the first week he was ramrodding the Big Hat. He let Bill Pell boss the boys and see that the chores were done and the stock looked after—but mostly he was in the saddle, looking the place over, riding the boundaries for places where rustling would be easy. He checked the springs and waterholes too, to see how far along into the summer we could water our stock without disturbing those nesters over on the Rio Grande.

I could tell by the way he went at things that he wasn't called Ace-in-the-Hole Haggarty for nothing. He was going at it slow and careful like—methodical, I reckon, is a better word. He was getting everything cleared up in his own mind—trying to see it the way it really was instead of seeing it the way I'd told him it was. He didn't ask me any questions, or come to me for an opinion. Only one time that I can remember did Haggarty come up to the house that first week—and *then* he wanted to see the tally book.

It was a pretty sorry looking book, that tally book of

mine, worn and greasy and dog-eared—but it had all our stock records for twelve years back in it. How many calves we branded every roundup, how many steers and how many heifer calves. How the she-stuff and the bulls counted out each year—and how many three-year-old steers we sold.

That was the way Haggarty got on to where the stealing was going on.

“Looky here, Mr. Benedict,” he showed me in the book. “Your she-stuff, allowing for a little natural decrease, checks out almost even. Your bulls are about right—and your old stuff, your cannors break about even. But look at the steers you sold last fall—check ’em against the steer calves you branded three years ago!”

“Judas Priest, man,” I yelled, amazed at the difference. “Why, there’s damned near eight hundred head short!”

“Call it seven-fifty, allowing for a few natural deaths,” Haggarty said. “You’re about seven hundred head short last year. Year before it tallies about the same. Three years back it checks out an even eight hundred and five without figuring any natural deaths.”

“Well, I’ll be damned,” I said. “You mean to say somebody has been robbing me regular like for three years?”

“Yeah—more than that,” Haggarty said, thumbing around some more in the tally book. “Four years ago

the three-year-olds you sold were seven hundred and ninety-six short of your steer calf tally of seven years before."

"You don't say."

"Yeah, I do," Haggarty said like he was telling me that the cook had lost a can of beans or half a slab of bacon. "And look at this—five years ago you were seven hundred and eighty-one steers short—but for the three years before that you're only missing about seventy head each year! "

"So? "

"So—it looks like seventy is about your natural loss! "

"And? "

"And somebody has been stealing the difference."

"Seventy from eight hundred is seven hundred and thirty," I marveled.

"Yeah, it's amazing," Haggarty said. "For the last five years somebody has been stealing about thirty thousand dollars' worth of stock from you every year! It's no wonder you're so damned near broke! "

"How the hell could anybody steal that many steers every year without getting caught? Seems like they'd leave an awfully plain trail," I said.

"Looks like they would," Haggarty answered, "seems like a man couldn't miss the trail of seven hundred thirty rustled steers. Well, see you later, Mr.

Benedict; got some more riding to do." But this time he took Bill Pell with him.

Didn't see either of 'em again for four or five days. They took a pack horse with some grub on him—and they come back four or five days later *with a dead man roped on the horse where the grub had been!*

"Got us a rustler, Mr. Benedict," Bill Pell told me. "Caught him red-handed."

"You dry-gulch him, Bill?" I asked, not really believing it.

"Nope, Haggarty nailed him in a fair fight. The rustler had his chance, but Haggarty shot faster," Bill said.

"The rest of 'em get away?" I asked.

"That's all there was, Mr. Benedict," Haggarty told me, looking sorta funny like.

"How the hell could one man steal seven hundred odd steers?"

"That's the joker in the deck, Mr. Benedict," Haggarty said. "He wasn't stealing any seven hundred steers—he only had two!"

"Well, I'll be damned," I said. "Two steers—hell, it would take him all year to steal seven hundred steers at two a day."

"Exactly," Haggarty said. "Looks like somebody has been robbing you slow and easy like, Mr. Benedict. We got something new to think about, anyway. Reckon

I'll turn in and sleep for a couple days—I'm dead on my feet."

"Go right ahead, Mr. Haggarty," Bill Pell said, "and I'll put the horses away. You want to keep the rustler's horse or send him on in to the sheriff with the body? "

"Reckon we better keep him a while," Haggarty said. "Maybe we can get him drunk and make him talk."

So Haggarty staggered off to bed like a man dead tired—and Bill Pell turned the dead rustler's horse into the corral along with the Big Hat stock.

Next morning the rustler's horse was gone—and so was Haggarty!

He'd been lying like a fish about being dead tired—his bed hadn't been slept in, and he didn't come back for three days.

I had three days to maul it all over in my mind—and it began to look to me like Haggarty was trying to drag a herring across the trail somehow.

Hell, one man couldn't steal seven hundred steers by himself!

But why would Haggarty want to make it look that way to me? And why did he want to take Bill Pell along as a witness? Why did Haggarty have to have such a good ironclad case, a witness of his killing a rustler on his own range—if he was an honest man?

What was Haggarty up to, I wondered. Who was he

in cahoots with? What kind of a man had Mac talked me into hiring? And what irons did Mac have in the fire himself?

All this I thought about the three days that Haggarty was gone—and it didn't do me any good, physically or mentally. It plumb wore me out—worrying all the time and not sleeping for three nights.

But I didn't know what trouble was until those three days were over and Haggarty came back to the Big Hat—and I found out that he'd picked a fight with the whole damned Jerktown gang!

Yes sir—he'd given 'em all notice to leave the country—and everybody was talking about it and betting on it!

Naturally, I was the last to hear about it—the whole damned county knew it before I did. Everybody in the basin knew that Haggarty had bit off more than he could chew—and that Skinnymalink had bet all our remaining assets that Haggarty could do it!

Haggarty gave Jerktown fair warning—he told them to get out or be run out. He didn't make any bones about it—up at Jerktown they knew his intention and the whole damned county knew about it too. No sir, it wasn't any secret—Jerktown wasn't due to be wiped out by surprise.

Haggarty sent a registered letter to Al Jenkins telling him to get out, that he had thirty days to pull out

lock, stock and baggage, including his daughter Jennifer. He ran an ad in the Dos Rios *Clarion* saying "All trespassers on the Big Hat Range are given thirty days' notice, as of November 9th, to vacate. If not vacated by December 9th they will be forcibly removed on December the tenth. Haggarty, Foreman Big Hat Ranch."

And, if that wasn't enough, he nailed a sign on Hangman's Tree, right opposite Al Jenkins' Primrose Bar and General Store in Jerktown for all to see.

"ALL RESIDENTS ARE WARNED TO GET THE HELL OUT OF JERKTOWN BY DECEMBER 9TH OR GET THROWN OUT."

Bets were laid all around the county on whether Haggarty could put them out, whether they'd leave without being put out, or whether Haggarty would leave himself before the time was up. The gamblers favored the Jerktown gang in their odds. Reckon they must have had the inside track somehow—or maybe they were just guessing—but it was five to one that the rustlers wouldn't leave of their own accord, five to one that Haggarty wouldn't put them out by force if they didn't—and ten to one that Haggarty would not be alive December 10th to do it!

Yes sir, Haggarty really got himself talked about when he warned the wild bunch to get out of Jerktown. Some of the better citizens in Dos Rios and some of the

smaller, harder working ranches sided in with him—but the Amalgamated, the big Eastern concern that had bought out the lower basin ranches, and all the members of the Cattleman's Association that I wouldn't join just plain up and rooted for the rustlers. I could understand the Association—for there wasn't a man in it whose ears I hadn't pinned back a time or two—being against us, but I couldn't see why the Amalgamated took an interest. They were new to the country, I reckon, and just naturally rode along with what they thought was public opinion.

Even the new minister in the Dos Rios church preached a sermon about it, mostly about Haggarty.

“Those that live by the sword shall die by the sword. Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord ” and so on.

Anne told me about it, she being the church-going member of the family.

“It seems we are nurturing a viper in our bosom, Pop,” she said one Sunday after spending the day in town. “Seems we are raising a grade-A rattlesnake that will strike in the dark of the moon at those poor and unsuspecting, not to mention lily white gentlemen who are trying to earn an honest living in our small but struggling settlement, namely and to wit, Jerktown. How in the hell do preachers get that way, Pop? ”

“Don't say hell, daughter,” I told her, laughing in spite of myself. “Don't say hell, it ain't ladylike.

Besides preachers got their rights to their opinions. Maybe they're wrong, sometimes, it ain't for me to say . . . but mostly they are sincere and believe in what they are saying. Likely this guy has heard about Haggarty being an imported gun-slinger, hired by the big bad wolf that has been hogging the range for twenty years—and has figured Haggarty out for a grade-A son! You sorta lean that way in your thinking yourself, don't you, Sis? ”

“ Guess I do, Pop,” she said. “ But I don't see how just one guy with two guns can oppress twenty or thirty tough hombres like those that hang out at Jerktown. And I don't see how Jennifer Jenkins can be exactly classed as an angel. You'd think a preacher would size things up a little better and see the odds against Haggarty doing what he says.”

“ Preachers aren't used to shooting craps like you are, Sis,” I told her. “ They don't know much about odds and percentages.”

“ Yeah, I know it,” she said kinda puzzled, “ but you'd think they'd know that one little bullet . . . one little chunk of lead would stop Haggarty.”

“ Can't everybody know everything,” I told her. “ Preachers know about souls, gamblers know about odds and the little hunks of lead. The gamblers are betting ten to one that Haggarty don't even live until December tenth.”

"Yeah, I know," she said, sorta smirking. "Seems like there was some talk of it going around town."

"You little vixen," I told her, "you give me a pain, sometimes, going to church in the morning and placing little ladylike bets in the afternoon. But you can't get rich on that percentage; when ten only gets you one it ain't worth doing unless you got an awful lot to bet with."

"Oh, I didn't bet that way," Skinnymalink said looking halfway between being ashamed of herself and half-way surprised that she had dug up some confidence in Haggarty. "I put our dough on Haggarty, Pop."

"What do you mean you put our dough on Haggarty?" I said, wondering just how deep she'd got us into this thing. "You mean maybe you bet a hundred dollars or so on Haggarty?"

"If Haggarty gets killed, Pop, we're sunk," she told me. "We ain't got the chance of a pebble in a whirlpool if they get Haggarty now . . . so I shot our wad, Pop. All the cash on hand."

Daughter and I had both been checking on the same account the last couple of years. I'd already signed over the half of the ranch that was to be hers when I died, and I'd kept the half that I was going to leave Jinglebob. So she'd gone and checked us all out on Haggarty.

"Left you a couple thousand for expenses the next thirty days, Pop—and the twenty thousand left I

planked down on Haggarty to be alive and kicking by December tenth, at high noon."

"Judas Priest," was all I could say when it hit me what she had done—why, if Haggarty was still alive at high noon on December tenth the gamblers would owe Skinnymalink two hundred thousand dollars.

That was just the same as sealing Haggarty's death warrant—all the gamblers, all the gambling houses in the county—liquor, fancy women and all—weren't worth two hundred thousand dollars.

If Haggarty was alive in thirty days the gamblers were just naturally out of business—but Haggarty wouldn't be alive. The gamblers would see to that. Skinnymalink had just the same as killed Haggarty!



“No use crying over spilt milk, Sis,” I told her, stunned at what she’d done. “You know you just the same as killed Haggarty, don’t you?”

“What do you mean, Dad?”

“You been sorta acting out of turn again,” I told her. “I know you thought you were being loyal to the Big Hat when everybody else is down on us. In your way you were sticking up for your folks—but those gamblers don’t take many risks. They are going to see to it that their bets are safe. Ain’t no way you could call this deal off, is there, Sis?”

“Guess not,” she said. “I forgot I wasn’t playing penny ante with the boys in the bunkhouse. I didn’t think, Dad, honest I didn’t. It never occurred to me that the gamblers weren’t on the level. Why some of ’em seem real nice even . . . but you don’t have to prove it to me.

“What’ll we do, Pop?” she asked me.

“Better tell Haggarty, I reckon,” I told her. “He’s the guy that will have the deck stacked against him so

I reckon we'd better let him know the spot he's in. We'll call him in and break it gentle to him."

We called him in, but Haggarty already knew about the bet, and it didn't seem to be worrying him a damned bit.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, Miss," he told Anne as he came in. "Didn't know you rated me that high as a killer."

"I'm sorry, Haggarty," Anne told him, "I really am. I just didn't think, that's all. I'll try and get the bet called off. Honest I will."

"Let it ride, Miss," Haggarty told her, lying like a fool to try and make her feel better about it. "Likely those gamblers had their plans all laid before you dealt with 'em and your putting up some more money wouldn't change it any. I don't think they'll get me. I know a few tricks myself . . . but if they do it won't be anything on your conscience."

Skinnymalink wasn't born yesterday and she knew Haggarty was lying—but she'd been raised around menfolks and knew they liked a lot to ease her feelings and soften life up for her a little and that they didn't like to be caught lying for these reasons. So she pretended to believe Haggarty, and she sorta softened up to him a little.

"How did you come to get mixed up in things like this in the first place, Haggarty?" she asked him.

"Not that it's any of my business, but a gal can't help being curious, you know."

"It's a long story, Miss," Haggarty told her. "Guess it just sorta grew on me. I always was handy with guns, and I always liked excitement. It's a way of making a living, I guess." He said it like it wasn't exactly a bed of roses or what he really would like to be doing, and I guess Anne sensed it, somehow.

"And if you could rub out and start all over, Haggarty," she asked, "what would it be? I'd be interested to know."

"The same things, I reckon," he told her after thinking it over a spell. "There are things that have happened to me that I wouldn't have missed for the world, that couldn't have happened any other way, I reckon. Yeah, I'd still play it the same way."

"Let's put it a little different then," Skinnymalink said. "What would you take, Mr. Haggarty, what would you take from the world if you could have anything you wanted? Liquor, women, money, political power? What would you take if somebody said, 'Name it, Haggarty, and it's yours'?"

Haggarty pondered a minute while he filled his pipe and tamped it down and got it going good. "You won't believe me, Miss Benedict," he said, talking serious and straight from the shoulder, the first time I'd ever heard him talk to her without seeming to laugh at her. "I

reckon that if I could have anything I wanted, I'd take peace."

"I might have known," Anne said, sorta sneering at him, "you're tired of looking back to see who is following you, tired of going in the back doors of places, tired of dodging sheriffs and dreading jails. You'd like to sleep of nights, huh? "

"That's part of it, Miss, but just a small part. Mainly, it would be the peace that comes from working hard for something I wanted, and seeing each day's work bringing me a little closer to it."

"Sounds kinda self-centered to me, Haggarty," Anne said, her knife still sharp for him, I guess, but I could see by the way her eyes lit up he'd said something she liked!

"Yeah, I guess it is self-centered," Haggarty admitted. "Most everything everybody does is for their own good. Even the folks that give everything they have away enjoy it. Reckon most everything done in this world is self-centered if you want to figure it real close. But what I would want to do wouldn't be for me alone, exactly."

"Maybe a woman mixed up in it, Haggarty? "

"Could be that way, Miss," Haggarty told her. "There could be a wife, and maybe some kids. Or it might just be a good friend. Somebody I liked a hell of a lot. Somebody I gave something to and maybe felt

better and bigger for giving it. This hard work and peace wouldn't be any good just by myself—hell, a man could go off and live in a cave and be a hermit if that was it. There'd have to be somebody else in it with me . . . somebody to help plan it, I reckon, and talk it over with, and tell when I was wrong and back me up a little when I was in trouble. Yep, there'd have to be more to it than just Haggarty."

"You sound sorta like somebody I used to know once," Anne said, as kindly as I'd ever heard her talk to him . . . and all at once the tears were running down her face. "You don't sound like a hired killer tonight. You've let yourself get in the wrong act."

"Us paid killers have our soft side, too." Haggarty was laughing at her again, making fun of her somehow in a way I didn't understand but she seemed to, yet he didn't seem at all sore at being called a hired killer. "And anyway, who the hell elected you judge and jury? You helped hire me, didn't you? Are you so blamed clean, yourself, hiring a man you think has got blood on his hands? "

"I guess not," Anne said. "I'm so mixed up I don't know what to think. But this I know . . . and you can take it or leave it, and you can like it or not like it. I wasn't in favor of doing things this way. I was strong against it. But Dad is older than I am and should know more . . . maybe his way, in hiring you, is right . . .

but if you kill one innocent man to save our ranch for us it won't be worth it. I'd rather give the whole thing back to the Indians and go and wait on tables in a restaurant, Haggarty. And that just about goes for you, too, Pop."

"Take it easy, Sis," I told her.

"Take it easy yourself and remember your own blood pressure," she said. "Let's sell out before Haggarty kills somebody and spoils it all for us . . . or somebody kills Haggarty and I can't sleep all the rest of my life thinking maybe I caused it. It won't work, Pop."

Haggarty looked at her in amazement for a while. Reckon he'd figured her wrong from the start, hiring him as a killer at all, figuring her as being the high and mighty daughter of a rich rancher that didn't give a damn for anything that got in her way. Guess he really saw her for the first time.

"Just supposing, Miss Benedict," he said, "that nobody gets killed, except a few that need it, and that nobody gets robbed and that Haggarty comes through it all sound in wind and limb . . . then would it be worth while?"

"Yes, it would, Haggarty," Anne said. "Dad would still have the biggest damned ranch in the territory and I'd still be the daughter of the biggest damned rancher in the territory and we'd have a little peace for a while.

And you'd have your two hundred a month, Haggarty. Excuse me, I don't really mean to sound nasty about it."

"All right, Miss, if that's the way you think it should be, that is the way it will be." Haggarty's voice was low, confident, sure of what he was saying. "It will come out the way it should."

I could see that Anne almost believed him, but woman-like she had to probe a little and make sure. "How can you face people that are gunning for you . . . how can you keep from being killed, Haggarty, without killing some of them? "

"Some of them I'll probably kill, Miss," Haggarty said, "so don't pretend you don't understand me rightly. There'll some of them be killed . . . but nobody innocent, nobody that wasn't shooting at me first. And," he was laughing at her again, dangling his watch on the end of his chain, "I've got my good luck piece, you know. As long's I carry it I lead a charmed life."

That seemed to pacify Anne somehow and she said, "Good night, gentlemen. See you in the morning. The rye is in the left bottle, the bourbon in the right. Don't make a damned pig of yourself, Pop," and she was gone to bed.

Haggarty heaved a sigh of relief. "That was somehow worse than a good fight," he said, looking kinda

sheepish. "Never did know what to say to the women-folks, anyhow. Bourbon or rye, Mr. Benedict?"

"Bourbon, Haggarty," I said; "better make it a double slug for both of us . . . tomorrow you may die, or how does it go?"

"That's the rough idea, I reckon," Haggarty said, pouring us out a stiff four-fingers apiece. "Down the hatch, Mr. Benedict. Only the good die young."

"Down the hatch, Haggarty," I said, "and may you always shoot first and ask questions later, Anne or no Anne."

But Haggarty didn't take my advice . . . the very next day Tiny McBride came gunning for him and caught him with his holsters hanging on the back of his chair, clear across the porch from where he was sitting and smoking with me. Tiny McBride, roaring drunk, mad as hell over Jennifer Jenkins, with both his guns trained on Haggarty!

When Haggarty won all that money betting on Tiny McBride's roulette wheel in Ravenhill's and made McBride out a crooked gambler, he finished McBride in Dos Rios.

Ravenhill had to fire him whether he wanted to or not—Ravenhill couldn't let it look like he ran a crooked place—so he made McBride the goat.

Tiny McBride had a brother, and everybody thought Tiny would go out to his brother's spread and do a little honest work for a change. But everybody was wrong, as they generally are.

The talk went around that Tiny went home once in a while, but mostly he hung out at Jerktown, and mostly with Jennifer Jenkins. Reckon he was right sweet on her, and it was understandable, for, although she wasn't any young innocent gal, she was durned good-looking and could easily twist a young punk around her fingers.

The talk said, too, that McBride's place, which is maybe four, five miles from Jerktown, wasn't above

suspicion itself. Nobody knew where "Old" McBride—that's what they called the big brother—came from, but rumor had it that he was an ex-Arizona outlaw that had saved him up a stake and bought him a place and pretended to turn honest, but suggested that maybe he might be hand in glove with the Jerktown gang.

I figured that if everybody thought he was a crook he likely wasn't for that kinda talk always grows with the telling and is generally nine-tenths wrong to begin with. I'd always found Old McBride a good cattleman—he built good tight fences, kept 'em repaired—and his cattle were always branded right and dehorned proper and got their blackleg shots and all. Yes, sir, Old McBride was a good cattleman, whatever he'd been before he came to the basin and I guess he just naturally couldn't help it if his young brother went to the bad and folks thought he was a rustler himself.

We were sitting on the porch that evening smoking after supper. Haggarty was puffing away at his damned pipe and I'd lit up my third cheroot for the day—one after each meal just like the doctor ordered, damn his soul—and Anne fooling with her blamed knitting. Just a big family gathering, all of us feeling kinda "good tired" after a busy day and none of us talking a hell of a lot.

➤ After a while Anne looked at Haggarty over her knitting—how the hell she could make all them ridges

and count her stitches and all while she was looking at one thing and thinking about another and talking about a third I never could savvy—anyways she looked at Haggarty sorta quizzical-like and said:

“ You know, Haggarty, you’re a funny sort of a guy. In my mind, that is. Whenever I close my eyes and say to myself what does Haggarty look like all I see is a big pair of guns standing out real strong with a vague shape of a man sorta holding them up, kinda filling in between them. What do you look like without your guns, Haggarty? Are you a human being when you shuck your artillery? ”

“ Ma’am, I wouldn’t know,” Haggarty said, looking just as solemn and curious about the whole thing as she did. “ It’s been so long since I appeared in public, or in the light, as far as that goes, without my guns that I wouldn’t rightfully remember whether I look like a low-class gambler or just a run-of-the-mill cowhand. All I know is that I feel sorta cold and naked without those guns. I even sleep in ’em sometimes, if the nights are cool and the wind is loud.”

“ Come, come, Haggarty, do not let false modesty stand in the way of satisfying a woman’s curiosity.”

“ Anything to please a lady,” Haggarty said, unbuckling his guns and scratching himself the way the lady in the burlesque show does when she takes off her corset. Then he took off his hat, smoothed down his hair,

and picked up Jinglebob's guitar that was lying around and started plunking away at it just like an ordinary human being.

He didn't look so hard, I thought, there in the softening light of evening—didn't look like all hell on wheels or greased lightning or sudden death or anything—just like an ordinary guy, good-looking, clean-looking without being pretty.

Yes, sir, he looked just like another fellow relaxing after a hard day.

I didn't know for shucks what he was playing, but pretty soon he started humming and the first thing you know he was singing, fairly decent, too—something about the pale moon shining above a green mountain.

Skinnymalink was looking at him kinda queer, speculating on something like a woman always is, shook her head like a drunk, and pretty soon the music caught hold of her and she joined in with Haggarty while they took us all through the green valley and wound up with a gal with truth in her eyes or something.

It didn't make sense except that they were enjoying it, and making quite a bit of noise at it.

After a while they stopped and Anne said, "It's just a song that thousands of people sing, isn't it, Haggarty? Most anybody could sing it?"

"Yeah, I reckon so, Miss," Haggarty told her, looking just as funny as she had. "Reckon lots of people

like that song. How do I look without my artillery, Miss Anne? Human, half-human, or still the hired killer? ”

But she never got to answer the question—at least not then—for it was at that minute Young McBride stepped around the corner of the porch, a gun in each hand, his thumbs holding the hammers back.

“ You want to stand up, Haggarty,” he said, “ or do you want to die sitting? ”

“ Put your guns down, McBride,” Haggarty said, not batting an eyelash, “ and get off the place.”

“ Your number’s up, Haggarty,” McBride said. “ Any prayers you got to say, say ’em.”

Haggarty picked up his pipe and filled it cool as ice. “ You got me where the hair is short, McBride,” Haggarty told him. “ My guns are hanging on that chair over there, as you can plainly see. You aim to kill an unarmed man? ”

“ What do you think? ” sneered McBride, walking a step closer. “ You’ve beat hell out of your last man, you’ve swiped the last girl you’re going to swipe . . . and you’re not going to wipe out Jerktown, Haggarty. Oh, no! ”

“ Oh, no? ” Haggarty asked, reaching in his coat pocket for a match . . . *and shooting twice through his coat pocket!* The shots were so close together they sounded like one—and McBride dropped his guns when the bullets broke both his arms above the elbow.

It was some real fancy shooting, and when Haggarty's hand came out of his pocket and struck a match to light his pipe it was as steady as Gibraltar.

"Reckon I could get you to sew up my coat, Miss Anne?" he asked. "It's my Sunday-go-to-meeting coat and I hate to see it ruined."

"You're a damned fool, Haggarty," Anne told him. "You shouldn't have run the risk . . . you should have killed him instead of trying to shoot so blamed fancy and break his arms. You might have missed . . . and he might have got you."

"Aw, he's just a fool kid," Haggarty said, sort of diffidently.

"She's right, Haggarty," I horned in, my heart galloping ninety to nothing. "You shouldn't cut it so close. Reckon we better tie McBride up or something so's he don't bleed to death?"

"Yeah, I guess so. We could bandage him up a little and when he comes to, we better hitch up a wagon and send him home to his brother. He'll be in a lot of pain, but he ain't hurt bad."

"When have you had time to get around to tampering with Jennifer, Haggarty?" Anne wanted to know, her voice sorta sour and waspish. "Can't you do any better than a rustler's promiscuous daughter? You ought to be ashamed, Haggarty," she sneered. "Why you aren't a bad-looking man when you're cleaned up,

Haggarty. Surely you could at least get you a high-class dance hall girl down at Dos Rios! ”

Haggarty had been laughing and joking all evening and having him a little fun . . . but now he was cold and mocking again, laughing at her instead of with her as he'd been doing all evening.

“ Reckon I forgot myself, Miss,” he said, “ and you expect too much of a hired killer. After all, you can't have a whole herd of Grade-A morals in a professional killer. Guess I'll get McBride packed down to the bunkhouse and the bleeding stopped a little. See you in the morning, Mr. Benedict.”

So Haggarty went on down to the bunkhouse packing Tiny McBride over one shoulder like he was a sack of feathers instead of a two hundred pound man, limp as a dishrag and hard as hell to carry.

Daughter flounced on up to bed leaving me with the butt of my stale cheroot and a lot of peculiar suspicions. One that Haggarty wasn't what he seemed at all . . . that he was going to bear watching, and that I'd been sold a bill of goods on him. And another peculiar suspicion that I didn't like at all—that my daughter, Anne, who'd turned up her nose at half the clean, honest young men in the territory had been taken in by Haggarty somehow. Maybe it was his rough and tough ways that made him seem a stronger man than any she'd met. Maybe it was the attraction that

any good-looking man with a wicked past seems to have for good women, or maybe it was the real kind of love beginning to work on her, the kind that doesn't have any reason back of it but just tears into your vitals and takes ahold of you—the way Anne's mother had done me.

Suddenly I felt very, very old, and tired as hell—and useless as a third leg. I'd lost my son through my own bullheadedness, and now my daughter, who I had learned to prize even more than my son, seemed headed for a lot of rough road—and all over the biggest damned ranch in the territory.

All at once my mind was made up. To hell with the ranch, to hell with the nesters and the Cattleman's Association and the rustlers, and Jerktown and the gamblers and all.

My mind was made up. Tomorrow I'd sell out for what I could get . . . it should be a hell of a lot. I'd sell out and I'd take Anne away where nobody knew us, maybe to a town where there was some law and order and folks could sleep at night without a gun under their pillows. And if she wanted Haggarty I'd take him along too. I'd do it the very next day while Haggarty was still alive and kicking.

I rummaged around and found a bottle of rye I'd been hiding against just a time like this . . . and I sat there a long, long time, weighing and balancing things,

looking back on the mistakes I'd made, the seeds I'd sowed in building me a big spread and getting rich . . . and I wished I was a bartender like Mac was.

Yes, sir . . . I was all primed to sell out the next morning, bright and early . . . but the rye made me oversleep. It was damned near noon when I woke up . . . and then it was too late to sell out!

☆ 13 ☆

When I woke up my head felt as big as a barrel and I had a taste in my mouth that only another snort of red-eye could take out. My bottle was dry as a bone—so I moseyed over to Haggarty's cabin to see if maybe he had a little snort around somewhere.

Haggarty did! He rummaged around in his warbag and brought out an unopened quart. "Hardly ever touch it myself," Haggarty said, "but a bottle of conversation-water does a lot more good than a pair of six-guns sometimes."

I downed me a stiff snort and looked Haggarty over in a new light—he seemed like a man after my own heart that morning—and he had an air about him, sorta sure of himself, like he knew what he was doing and where he was going. Maybe it was just the feeling the whiskey warmed up in me, but Haggarty seemed Grade A that day—for a little while, anyways.

"You don't like whiskey?" I asked him. "Anything special you got against it—or you just plain don't like it?"

"Yeah, I guess I like it all right," Haggarty admitted, "but in my line of work you got to keep a head on your shoulders—and if you go to looking at the bottom of too many glasses you're bound to get your boat in a storm. Reckon that's what I got against it—it gets you mixed up like."

"What you mean, Haggarty?" I asked, wondering if he was going to be the next guy to preach me a sermon on the evils of old Demon Rum.

"Well, it's sorta hard to explain," Haggarty said, "but maybe if I tell you about a guy I used to work for, you'll maybe get the idea."

"Fire away, Haggarty."

"It was a long time ago," Haggarty said, "and I was very, very young and still remembered what my mamma had told me—yes, I had a mamma, Miss," Haggarty said to Skinnymalink who had sneaked in and was listening quietly, but had snickered at her own thoughts when Haggarty had mentioned what his mother had told him.

"I really had a mamma—and a daddy, too. It ain't like what you're thinking, Miss Anne—I've even got a birth certificate somewhere or other."

"I apologize for my thoughts," Anne laughed at him, "so get on with the story, Haggarty."

"Well, it was like this," Haggarty went on. "I was working for this Jerry Jones, over on the Beaverhead.

He was as good a cowman as ever lived—hard-working, money-saving, sober and strait-laced—until one day he happened to strike a pocket of nuggets on Beaver Creek and got himself more money than he knew what to do with.”

“ So he bought a lot of whiskey, huh, Haggarty? ” Skinnymalink horned in.

“ Nope, bought him some race horses, Jerry Jones did,” Haggarty told us. “ Bought him some nice three-year-olds—and every Sunday afternoon he’d race those race horses—and we’d all bet a little and win a little or lose a little and have a helluva lot of fun.”

“ Can’t see anything wrong with that,” Skinny-malink said.

“ Nope—it was all right,” Haggarty said. “ Everything was fine until Jerry Jones found him another little pocket of gold and got him a lot more money kicking around in his Levis. Didn’t know what to spend it on—so he bought him some trotting horses. So every Sunday we’d race the race horses and trot the trotting horses—and we’d all bet a little and win a little or lose a little and have a helluva lot of fun.”

“ Thought we were talking about whiskey,” I horned in, pouring me another snort to clean the cobwebs out of my mind.

“ Keep your pants on, Mr. Benedict,” Haggarty said. “ I’ll get to that in due time. Things rocked along

for a spell all content—until Jerry Jones found him another deposit of gold that made him rich as all get out. Had money to burn, he did—so he bought him some fighting dogs ——”

“And every Sunday,” Skinnymalink butted in, “you’d race the racing horses and trot the trotting horses and fight the fighting dogs, and you’d all bet a little and win a little or lose a little and have a helluva good time.”

“You’re sharp as a whip, Miss Anne,” Haggarty told her. “That’s exactly what we’d do. Things went along that way for quite a spell—until Jerry Jones went prospecting again and found him another pocket of gold nuggets in Beaver Creek, and he was really a rich man this time. Had money to burn, Jerry Jones did—and he finally got him a fancy woman with some of it. And every Sunday we’d all get together and race the racing horses and trot the trotting horses and fight the fighting dogs—and Jerry Jones would fool around with his fancy woman. We’d all bet a little and win a little or lose a little and have a helluva lot of fun.”

“You mean a woman like Jennifer Jenkins?” Skinnymalink asked, her nose turned up like she smelled something bad.

Haggarty didn’t answer right off. He sorta pondered that one for a spell before he said, “No—not like Jennifer Jenkins, Miss Anne. I wouldn’t go so far as

to call Jennifer a fancy woman. She ain't what you'd call low-down exactly—reckon she's just got a big heart or something. Anyways—to get back to Jerry Jones, that's how things rocked along for quite a spell—we all worked hard all week and had our fun on Sunday and everybody seemed happy, right up to the time Jerry found some more gold.”

“Go on,” Skinnymalink said. “There couldn't be that much gold in one little creek like Beaver Creek.”

“Yeah, there was,” Haggarty told her, serious as hell. “There was more money in Jerry Jones' Levis than you could count. Kinda got him off his rocker a little, I reckon—having so much money. Didn't know what to spend it on, so he finally went to buying whiskey with it, and drinking night and day. Got him all confused, that whiskey drinking did. Got him all mixed up.”

“What happened, Haggarty?” I wanted to know, setting down the drink I was about to take.

“Well, it was like this, Mr. Benedict,” Haggarty said. “This Jerry Jones would go to drinking whiskey all week—and on Sundays he'd go down to the race track all full of whiskey—and he got to racing his trotting horses and trotting his racing horses and fighting his fancy woman and fooling around with his fighting dogs. That whiskey plumb got him all mixed up and he finally went broke. Died in the poorhouse, Jerry Jones did—all because of whiskey drinking.”

"Makes a good story, Haggarty," I told him, laughing until I like to split. "I can see why you don't like to do any drinking to speak of—but I'm about to fix all of that."

"You're about to do what?" Haggarty asked.

"I'm about to fix it so we can all do all the drinking we want without worrying about it—I'm going to sell the place. Quit. Get out of the cattle business."

"Going to give up the fight?" Haggarty asked.

"Yeah—if you want to put it that way."

"Who are you going to sell out to?" Haggarty asked, "and what are you going to sell them?"

"Why, I'm going to sell the Big Hat Ranch, Haggarty," I told him. "It's the biggest damned ranch in the territory and it'll bring a good price. What did you think I was going to sell?"

"I didn't know for sure," Haggarty said, "but hell—outside of your cows you haven't got a damned thing that a man in his right mind would buy. You got plenty of grass—but cattle got to have water, and you haven't got any water."

"I still got a few springs and creeks," I told him, "and when they dry up, whoever buys the place can water his stock on the mile of river front I still got in Box Canyon. There's plenty of room for thousands of head to water there—you can water lots of stock on a mile of river front."

"Yeah, that's right," Haggarty admitted. "You could water a hell of a lot of cows on that mile of river—if you had it. *But you haven't got it any more, Mr. Benedict!* "

"What do you mean, I haven't got it?" I asked. "I had it last night when I went to bed. Did it up and walk away in the night, Haggarty?"

"Nope, it's still there, right where you left it last night," Haggarty told me, "but it ain't yours any more. It was open land, Mr. Benedict—and it got home-steaded, too. It got filed on this morning while you were sleeping off your whiskey!"

"Another nester get that section too?" I asked.

"Nope—not a nester, Mr. Benedict," Haggarty said, "just one of the boys that works for you. Name of Haggarty—John Haggarty!"

So that's the way it was. Haggarty had me sewed up tight, the low-down son. He had me over a barrel, where I couldn't sell my own ranch if I wanted to. Damn MacGregor, I thought, damn his soul for ever getting me mixed up with Ace-in-the-Hole Haggarty!

☆ 14 ☆

“Say it again, Haggarty,” I told him, floored by what he had just told me, “say it slow and easy and let it sink in gradual like.”

“I said I’d homesteaded your last mile of river front, Mr. Benedict,” Haggarty said. “It isn’t yours to use any more—unless I say so. It’s my land now—*and you aren’t selling the Big Hat Ranch*—you can’t, now. Nobody would be fool enough to buy it without any water!”

“You mean you stole our last water, Haggarty?” Skinnymalink asked. “You were that low-down, were you?”

“Yes and no, Miss Anne,” Haggarty said. “I didn’t steal it—it was all done legal and proper, and I’m not going to stop your using the water.”

“So what’s this all about?” Skinnymalink asked. “Why did you have to go and file on our last water if you weren’t going to stop us from using it?”

Haggarty looked at her like I’d never seen him look at her before—sorta like she’d measured out different

than he'd expected. Kinda like he saw something good in her that he'd never seen before.

"It's hard to put into words, exactly," he said, "but one way or another this ranch has got to go on. For a long time."

"So you'll get your two hundred a month for twenty years, huh?" Skinnymalink asked, sorta like she understood him for the first time. "You need it pretty bad, Haggarty?"

"If I'd never come to work here, it would have been different, Miss Anne," Haggarty told her, being very respectful to her, like he always was, but meaning it this time instead of ribbing her like he usually did. "But I got myself way out on a limb, mixing up in your fight. I maybe won't live anywhere near that twenty years myself—but the ranch has got to go on just the same. My neck's stuck out pretty far since I tangled with McBride and killed that rustler that was stealing your stock."

"What makes you think your money wouldn't go on just the same if we sold out, Haggarty?" Skinnymalink asked.

"You couldn't sell out for much—whoever has been pulling you down has got you damned near broke—you haven't got enough to sell to pay two hundred a month for twenty years. And if you did, it probably would get wasted long before that time."

“ So what’s the program now, Haggarty? ” Skinny-malink asked. “ Where do we go from here? ”

“ We fight—Miss Anne,” Haggarty said. “ We do just what the other guy expects us to do—we fall into his trap and we do just what he wants us to do. But we keep our ace in the hole covered up until the last card is played.”

“ What does this mysterious somebody or other want us to do? ” I asked, sober as a judge, scared as hell, and suspicious as all get-out.

“ He wants us to raise hell with the nesters,” Haggarty said. “ He wants you to go off half-cocked and bust a lot of laws.”

“ So what are we going to do, Haggarty? ” I asked, halfway suspecting what he would answer.

“ We’re going to go off half-cocked and bust a lot of laws—we’re going to raise hell with the nesters, and play right into their hands, Mr. Benedict,” Haggarty said. “ We’re going to do just what you would do if I wasn’t around. Whoever is ramrodding this deal knows you pretty well—and we’re going to act just like he thinks you’d act.”

“ So? ” I asked.

“ So they got you sized up for just what you are,” Haggarty said, “ and they’ve planned the whole thing on it.”

“ How’s that? ” I asked.

“ You maybe won’t like me to tell you,” Haggarty answered, “ but I don’t see any way around it. You’re a pretty bullheaded old gent, Mr. Benedict—you like things run your way—and if they don’t run things to suit you, you’re apt to jump the fence and take the law into your own hands. That’s what somebody or other is figuring on.”

“ Hate to admit it, Haggarty,” I said, “ but you’re nigh on to being right. Go on—I’ll listen.”

“ Well, here’s the way I see it,” Haggarty said. “ Somebody is robbing you right and left. The law ain’t helped you any—in fact it’s helping the other guy. And on top of that you’re laid up and can’t fight back—so you go and hire a low-down killer. Name of Haggarty—and he goes out and raises merry hell. Likely kills some people. First thing you know you’re all tangled up with the law, you’re in jail—or holding the bag—or dead, maybe! ”

“ And then what happens? ” Skinnymalink wanted to know.

“ And then somebody steals your ranch—or buys it for next to nothing! ” Haggarty said.

“ Why don’t we do just the opposite of what Dad would do,” Skinnymalink asked, “ and fool ’em? ”

“ This ain’t the only move in the game,” Haggarty said, filling his pipe and lighting it and talking real slow, sorta like he was just thinking out loud. “ This

ain't the only move. It's a game—like chess or checkers—it follows a pattern—you got to lose a lot of moves to win, and there's a whole lot before the last move. It don't make any difference how many moves we lose if we win the last one! ”

I reckon Haggarty knew what he was talking about, but it all sounded damned complicated to me. Hell, if I saw a snake I killed it—I didn't wait until the snake ran around a bush three times and spit tobacco juice over its left shoulder—no sir, I killed it and asked questions afterwards.

“How the hell is a man going to know what to do, Haggarty?” I asked. “Take them damned nesters, now. There was a day when I would have burned them out and thought nothing of it—but now I don't know. Maybe they got a right to steal my water. Maybe they are a sign of progress, or something.”

“Leave your nesters to me, Mr. Benedict,” Haggarty said. “I've got an idea about them. I've got a plan for them—just like I've got one for your rustlers in Jerktown. But I've got to do it my way. You've got to keep your finger out of the pie for a spell.”

“I ain't so sure,” I said—and I wasn't, I was all mixed up—“I ain't so sure that I want them nesters run out. Maybe that's where we are going to get caught with our pants down.”

“Nope, you're wrong, Mr. Benedict,” Haggarty

said. "The time when we are going to get caught is when we ain't looking for it, and it's going to be in a place we aren't expecting it—and it's going to be by a guy we think is Grade A. You leave them nesters to me."

"Don't go killing any of them, Haggarty," Skinny-malink horned in.

"No sir," I said, "I won't stand for any killing."

"You won't have to stand for any more killing by Haggarty, Benedict"—a voice boomed from the door—it was Dan McBride, young McBride's brother, with both guns out. "Haggarty's killing days are over. Say your prayers, Haggarty—if you believe in anybody to pray to!"

But Haggarty only laughed! There was Dan McBride, tough as they come, with murder in his eyes and a gun in each hand—and Haggarty just laughed in his face, the crazy son!

☆ 15 ☆

“What’s so damned funny, Haggarty?” McBride asked, thumbing back his hammers.

“You, McBride,” Haggarty said, “thinking you’re going to kill me.”

“Hell, I ain’t just thinking about it—you’re the same as dead, Haggarty. Laughing won’t help you none.”

“Put up your guns,” Haggarty said, cool as a hog on ice. “I ain’t the guy you ought to kill, and you couldn’t do it if you wanted to.”

“Why the hell can’t I?” McBride asked. “I got my guns on you, cocked and ready—and they shoot where I tell ’em to.”

“Your name wasn’t always McBride,” Haggarty told him. “It was different when you rode with Argentina Ed, wasn’t it?”

“What if it was?” McBride asked. “What if I did ride with Argentina Ed? That’s all over and done with.”

“Yeah—it’s all over—but it ain’t done with,” Hag-

garty told him. "Argentina Ed wouldn't have lied about you."

"No?"

"No!" Haggarty told him. "And that's why you ain't going to kill me. Argentina told me he'd never seen you kill a man without giving him an even break."

"All right, Haggarty," McBride said, holstering his guns, "take your even break. I'll count three and you go for your irons."

"I'd kill you in your tracks, McBride," Haggarty said, his voice hard as nails now that McBride had holstered his guns. "Your kid brother was pretty handy with his guns, but he wasn't handy enough."

"Hell, shut up and let's shoot," McBride snapped at him. "You talk too damned much—and there's only two guys in the territory faster than me. One was Argentina Ed ——"

"—and the other one was the guy he gave this watch to when he died," Haggarty said, pulling a big gold stem-winder from his pocket. "It's never been off my body since Ed gave it to me!"

"You couldn't be him—he's dead," McBride said, but I could see his confidence was shaken a little by the sight of that watch. "Still, they never found his body—but it would take some proving, Haggarty."

"Want some chickens for supper, Miss Anne?" Haggarty asked Skinnymalink.

"I really hadn't given it much thought," Anne said, her knees knocking together she was so scared, "but since you mention it, why, yes."

"Right out on the corral fence are two nice young roosters, McBride," Haggarty said, "just a-sitting there, looking at each other, each one of them wondering what the other one is doing in the world he thinks he owns. Take your pick, McBride—and when Miss Anne counts three, we'll cut loose."

"I'll take the one nearest the pump, Haggarty," McBride said.

I watched Haggarty closer than I did McBride—for I figured Haggarty to shoot McBride while McBride was shooting the rooster. That was the way Haggarty worked—but Haggarty had ideas of his own.

"One—two—three," Skinnymalink counted—and, Wham! Haggarty's rooster was blasted off the fence and kicking in the corral dust before McBride's guns had cleared his holster! McBride didn't even shoot.

"Better pot the other one too, Haggarty," McBride said, starting for his horse. "Hell, one rooster ain't enough for supper."

"Hey, wait a minute," Haggarty said. "Where you going, Dan?" *Dan*, he said, not *McBride*.

"*Home*," McBride told him. "Hell, I ain't mad at you no more. I ain't afraid of you—but I see things a little clearer now. I know who you are, Haggarty—and

I reckon you were pretty easy on the kid. You could have killed him just as easy as busting his arms for him. Hell, I couldn't even shoot a rooster's head off at that distance. I would have had to shoot him in the body somewheres. Reckon I should thank you, Haggarty."

"Thank me, hell," Haggarty said. "You're going to help me, McBride!"

"What you mean, help you?" McBride asked.

"I didn't pick any fight with your kid brother, Dan," Haggarty said, "and I didn't do anything to make him come a-gunning for me—but he came at me with both guns out."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," Haggarty said, patiently. "If you really want to even things up for me shooting your kid brother—help me get the guy that filled your kid brother full of foolishness and chased him on to me. That's the guy your quarrel is with, Dan—not with me."

McBride studied Haggarty for a spell, and looked at the dead rooster laying in the corral dust and the watch that had been Argentina Ed's—looked quite a spell before he answered.

"Reckon you're right," Dan McBride said, "only your name ain't Haggarty, or wasn't once, at least. How do you want me to help you?"

Haggarty didn't answer right off—kinda hemmed

around a while like he wasn't sure of what he needed from McBride—yet, all at once, I knew that Haggarty was damned sure of what he wanted from the start. Somehow I sensed that Haggarty knew all along and had planned things from the start, the cold, calculating son. He'd picked a fight with Tiny McBride on purpose—all so as he could draw Dan McBride into his trap—he'd maimed Tiny when he could have killed him easy as pie—all to make Dan think Haggarty was the real McCoy, and throw Dan McBride's guns into Haggarty's fight.

I don't reckon I had really quite realized what a cold, conniving man Haggarty was up until then—but shivers ran up and down my back as I watched Ace-in-the-Hole Haggarty sucking Dan McBride into his trap that day.

“Reckon there's two things I need to whip the Jerktown gang, or whoever is backing them,” Haggarty said. “One is a good man with his guns like you are, McBride, a man like Argentina Ed used to lean on.”

“And what's the other thing you need?” Skinnymalink asked, her eyes bugging out like a couple of saucers every time Argentina Ed's name was mentioned. Who the hell was he, I wondered—McBride seemed to hold him high and Haggarty seemed to think well of him, and Skinnymalink knew who he was, too. But me, Harry Benedict, I'd never heard of Argentina Ed.

"I need McBride's lease up in the hills, up where the Rio Grande's right small—up where his spread runs right smack into the Jerktown gang's range," Haggarty said to her—but he was talking to McBride, and McBride knew it.

"It ain't much of a place, Haggarty," McBride said, "but it makes me a good steady living if I work hard at it—so I'll want it back when this mess is all cleared up. Lease it to you for a dollar a year until then—and you let my stock run in with yours."

"Thanks, Dan," Haggarty said. "We'll have a lease drawn up next time we're both in town. Want to bring your gear down to the bunkhouse?"

"Yeah, reckon so!"

"You're doing the bookkeeping, Miss Anne," Haggarty told her, "so put McBride on the payroll. Hundred a month and cartridges. That all right with you?"

"That ain't much for a good gun hand, Haggarty," McBride laughed, "but I ain't doing this for money, so I reckon that's more than all right. You can start throwing your cattle and men into my place anytime."

But it wasn't money or men Haggarty threw into McBride's place, four or five days later. No sir, it was water—Haggarty started backing every drop of water in the Rio Grande up into McBride's place—and the whole damned county, including the town of Dos Rios, came down on us like a nest of hornets!

I thought just like McBride did that Haggarty wanted McBride's place so he could throw some men into it and have sort of a strong place near Jerktown where he could watch the trail and plug the leaks. But he had me fooled from the start. He wanted McBride's place so he could do with it as he damned pleased and outfox the nesters along the Rio Grande.

Haggarty went to work on 'em the next day after McBride signed the lease. Rode over to where they'd built their church and tacked a big sign up on the door saying:

EVERY HOMESTEADER ON THE RIO
GRANDE IS WARNED TO BE HERE
SATURDAY NIGHT AT SEVEN
O'CLOCK SHARP FOR HIS OWN GOOD!

(signed) John Haggarty
Foreman, Big Hat Ranch

They came to a man, every damned nester on the

river front. All of them were there—and not a gun or a knife showing on any of them—but they outfoxed Haggarty. They brought the sheriff with them—the sheriff and his two deputies—all armed to the teeth!

I couldn't go over to the meeting myself, so I sent Skinnymalink and she told me what happened. She told me how they wouldn't bluff, how they had their law right there with 'em. She told me how they outfoxed Haggarty, they thought—and how Haggarty outfoxed them with five short words!

Haggarty was a good actor, the way Skinnymalink told it to me. He'd told the homesteaders all to be there about seven o'clock and naturally a lot of them got there sooner and they were sorta chafing at the bit and wondering what the hell had happened to this boogie man that had threatened to run twenty-five or thirty rustlers out of Jerktown and forty-six nesters out of the valley all by himself.

Haggarty didn't show up until nearly eight o'clock and by that time the apple-knockers, who were used to going to bed with the chickens, were all nervous and jittery.

Haggarty came in clean-shaven, wearing a new shirt and had his boots all shined—and there wasn't a gun in sight on him. He came in all alone—just one medium-sized jigger—quiet-looking, and not near as big as they'd pictured him in their minds.

“ Good evening, gentlemen, sorry to have made you wait around on me,” Haggarty told ’em. “ Being that this is a house of God, I think we ought to start this shindig with a prayer. Will you oblige, Reverend? ”

This seemed to strike a welcome note with the nesters, especially with Carl Ressler, who worked his homestead six days a week and preached to the nesters come Sunday.

“ Our Heavenly Father,” Carl Ressler prayed, “ give us the courage to withstand the trials of this new country. Give us strength to fight our battles, Father—and give us understanding, so that we may know friend from foe. And give us strength—strength to unite ourselves against a common enemy, or to help a common friend. Forgive us of our sins and help us to follow the path Thou would like us to tread. Amen.”

“ Thank you,” Haggarty said, all sugar and spice. “ I think that maybe none of us pray enough, or have faith in the things that are right. I think maybe we’re all led astray right smart by the things that aren’t right.”

“ Amen,” Carl Ressler said.

“ That’s why I asked you to meet me here tonight,” Haggarty told them, the lying hypocrite—hell, he’d ordered them to be there if they wanted to survive, and they brought the law with them to be sure they did. “ I have asked you all to come here for your own good! ”

"What good can a killer do us?" the Reverend asked, not being hornswoggled a bit by Haggarty. "He who lives by the sword shall perish by the sword!"

"Yeah, that's right," Haggarty said. "You know your Scripture all right, Reverend. Likely you know 'Let him who is without sin cast the first stone.' And I sorta remember one about 'Judge not lest you be judged.' You haven't seen me 'Living by the sword,' Reverend—you've only heard about it."

Carl Ressler looked at Haggarty sorta queer like for a while, and then the same thing happened to him I'd seen happen to Dan McBride. Ressler's defenses sorta went down and you could see his mind open up to Haggarty.

"What is it you can do for us homesteaders, Brother Haggarty?" Carl Ressler asked.

"Two things," Haggarty said quietly. "There are two things I can do for you. I can keep you all from starving to death, which you would be doing sooner or later on the land you've homesteaded—I can make your farms good farms that bring you a bountiful living. I can give you what you would call the material things of life, Reverend."

"And the other thing you can do, Brother Haggarty?"

"I can starve you out almost overnight and send you back to where you came from with your tails between

your legs like a lot of whipped dogs!" Haggarty snapped, tough as a boot now.

"How can you do this to us?" Carl Ressler asked.

"How can you, one man, do this to forty-six of us?"

"Hell—excuse me, Reverend," Haggarty said, "I didn't do it to you. The jigger that sold you all on this homesteading idea did it to you. It don't rain every day out here like it does in Missouri. You all got you some nice fertile river bottom land that would grow good crops—if you had the water, *but—you haven't any water.*" Just five words but they outfoxed the nesters.

"The Rio Grande is full of water," Carl Ressler said, "plenty of water for all of us."

"How you going to get it on your crops?" Haggarty asked. "Water don't run up hill and your land is all above the river level."

"We're going to dig us a ditch," Ressler said; "we reckoned to go up to Box Canyon and cut us a ditch through the high ground—high enough up to throw the water on to our claims. We got enough plows and scrapers and enough men to do the job before we need the water in the spring."

"You wouldn't want to be breaking any laws, would you, Reverend?" Haggarty asked.

"No, Mr. Haggarty," Ressler said.

"You can't dig a ditch through my homestead with-

out my say-so without breaking the law," Haggarty told him. "I've homesteaded every foot of ground on this side of Box Canyon—and the rest is sheer bluffs on the other side, five, six hundred feet high. You can't dig your ditch through my place."

"We heard it was open land," Ressler said, "but too rocky for growing. Reckon that's why none of us thought to file on it."

"Yeah—and now you're sitting down there on your nice rich river bottom land without a drop of water!"

"Reckon we'll start packing up in the morning, Mr. Haggarty," Ressler said. "We're all law-abiding folks. No use going through a summer expecting rains that don't come."

"The hell you will, Reverend," Haggarty said without even bothering to excuse himself for cussing this time. "You'll start digging tomorrow—but you'll start digging where I tell you to."

Them nesters had all been looking pretty down-in-the-mouth while Haggarty was telling them about his claim—but to a man they perked up when he started cussing them and bossing them around.

"What's up your sleeve, Ace-in-the-Hole?" Skinny-malink asked from one of the back pews, not able to keep her nose out of things any longer.

"Nothing up my sleeve, Miss Anne," Haggarty said, "but I got every drop of water in the Rio Grande shut

off and backing up into McBride's spread, which I got leased all legal like."

"You didn't go and do that with a six-gun, Haggarty?" Skinnymalink asked. "Awful hard to start a landslide big enough to dam the Rio Grande with just a forty-five."

"Nope, it took a chunk of dynamite," Haggarty admitted. "There was a place up on the hillside just too blamed rocky to dig post-holes in—so I was blasting 'em out with dynamite. First thing you know the whole hill sorta fell in my lap."

"Purely accidental, of course?"

"Purely, Miss Anne, purely," Haggarty answered, without batting an eye, "and you know, I'm right worried about it."

"You don't say so."

"Yeah, I do say so," Haggarty told her, "along about now the Rio Grande is getting plumb dry—all the way down to Dos Rios. What are all those good, pious people down there going to do without a little water to wash down their whiskey with?"

"Couldn't you maybe have another accident," Skinnymalink asked, "and blast away that landslide?"

"It would take a thousand men and a thousand teams ten or fifteen years to move all that rock away, Miss Anne," Haggarty said. "The whole damned mountain came down, ker-plunk, right across Box Can-

yon. Water won't ever run again in the new river bed—your homesteads are really bone dry now, Reverend Ressler—*your land isn't even on the river front any more.*”

“It doesn't matter, Mr. Haggarty,” Ressler said, his voice sounding old and tired. “You spoke of some digging you wanted us to do. Maybe you're going to give us a little work so as we can pay our way back home?”

“That's sorta what I called this meeting for, Reverend,” Haggarty said. “You folks are all washed up without me ——”

“And with you they're all right, Haggarty?” Skinnymalink asked, sensing that Haggarty was ready to show the ace he always had in the hole and wondering what the hell it was.

“With me they're all right, Miss Anne,” Haggarty said, calm and easy and sure of himself. “I'm the nesters' Santa Claus. All they got to do is take their teams and plows and wagons and haul away some dirt and rocks that keep the water from running in the old river bed that goes through Big Hat land.”

“How could that help us farmers?” Carl Ressler asked. “How much better off would we be?”

“The old river bed ain't but a hundred yards to a quarter of a mile from any of your homesteads,” Haggarty said, “and it's uphill from all of your places.

Water would run right on them if you blasted a few holes in that rocky dike that forms the banks—and dug a few little ditches to take the water where you wanted it.”

“ You aren’t doing this just to help us, are you? ” Carl Ressler asked. “ You’ve got an axe to grind, of course.”

“ Sure I have, Reverend,” Haggarty grinned. “ I ain’t working for my health—my health is good. I need some hay and grain to winter the Big Hat stock on.”

“ How much of our crops do we have to give you for the water? ” Ressler asked.

“ Hell, you don’t have to give me any, Reverend,” Haggarty said. “ Shucks—we’ll buy it. All you don’t need. Hams and bacon too, in a smaller way! ”

“ It is a good deal for us homesteaders, but we will not take it unless you tell us what you really want,” Carl Ressler said, a strange stubbornness coming over him. “ We are all God-fearing, law-abiding people, and we will not be a part of any of your schemes.”

Haggarty looked at this Ressler strangely, studying him a long time, not quite understanding people who were passive and yet strong, I reckon. Finally he figured out the answer that seemed to please the Reverend.

“ I will tell you how it is, and you decide whether you will play it my way or not,” Haggarty told him, straight from the shoulder. “ I have a big fight on my

hands. Folks who are fighting me are smart as all get-out. They have hired rustlers, and gun-fighters and gamblers to take away something that I have been hired to protect. The rustlers, the gamblers and the gun-fighters I know how to handle—that is my trade. But forty-six honest men I can't fight."

"So you give us water to bring our land to life, so that we will fight on your side?" Ressler asked.

"No, you don't understand, Reverend," Haggarty said, seriouser than he's ever been, Anne told me later. "I don't want you to fight—either for me or against me. I just want you to raise your crops and mind your own business. I may be right or I may be wrong—but I don't want you to judge me. I just want you to raise your families and tend your farms and leave the Big Hat Ranch alone. Neither for us nor against us."

Ressler pondered this a spell, moved by what Haggarty had told him, and finally he said, "We are honest men, Haggarty—we work hard for very little. Tell us where to dig to get our water—show us how to do it—and you will not have forty-six more enemies. We will do unto others as we would be done by—we will not judge lest we be judged. Forty-six men and their teams will be yours when you say, Mr. Haggarty."

The sheriff sighed a sigh of relief, Skinnymalink said. The forty-six nesters all crowded around the plans for ditches Haggarty had already worked out—and

Skinnymalink kept her fingers crossed, wondering what Haggarty was going to pull out of the bag next.

Or at least so she said—but I reckon she was beginning to be taken in like these nesters were. She was softening up, it seemed like to me—for I didn't trust the bastard any farther than I could see him. Wish she'd been the same way—it would have saved her a lot of grief!

When a man gets my age he spends a lot more time thinking and a helluva lot less rampaging around than he did when he was Skinnymalink's age.

So the next day after I heard about Haggarty's pow-wow with the nester, I sat myself down to do some serious thinking—but the more I thought about it all the less I was sure of.

The Senator didn't help me straighten it out any. He come busting out to the ranch on his show-off horse . . . prancy, nervous Palomino he rode at election time to show the cowhands he knew a thing or two about horses. He come busting out around noon and started raising hell about Haggarty and the water right off the bat.

"You've got to get rid of this Haggarty, Harry," the Senator told me after we'd shaken hands and had a snort out of the bottle of kerosene he called scotch. "You can't afford to go bucking public opinion any more and keep a man like him on the place."

"What has public opinion got against Haggarty?"

I asked. "Far as I'm concerned he's a damned good cowman. Knows his way home in the dark, too."

"I'll tell you," the Senator said. "I'm a politician, and I know how to listen to folks and figure out what they want—and get it for them."

"Yeah?" I said. "That's what politicians are supposed to do? So you get 'em what they want—what's that got to do with Haggarty?"

"Nobody has got anything good to say for Haggarty," the Senator said. "The honest folks and the crooks, the good and the bad—they all have one opinion, one vote each—and they're all down on Haggarty."

"What seems to be wrong with him?" I asked. "Whose toes has he been treading on?"

"The gamblers don't like him because he made them all look like crooks—and they stand to go broke if he's still alive a month from now and Skinnymalink wins her bet. The church folks don't like him because he took up for Jennifer Jenkins—and those that drink water and those that take baths don't like him because he shut off their drinking and bathing water."

"How could a little medium-sized jigger like Haggarty shut off a big river like the Rio Grande?" I asked—wondering how the hell the Senator knew all about it so quick.

"Friend of mine was at the meeting those nesters held," Senator Pearce said, "so don't go playing inno-

cent on me, Harry. You know damned well that Haggarty shut off their water—did it on his own homestead so they couldn't invoke the injunction they had to keep you from doing it yourself."

"Didn't break any laws, did he?" I asked.

"That's not the point," the Senator said; "he didn't break the law—but he didn't do right by the most people. Times are changing, Harry."

"Yeah, so I see."

"You got to listen to your friends," the Senator told me. "You and MacGregor are both Grade A with me—but you've both got to learn something if you're going to stay in the picture today."

"What have we got to do, Addison?" I asked, willing to learn.

"You've both got to realize that other folks have got rights, too. You've got to learn about society, Harry—you've got to pay more attention to the laws. You have to respect 'em. You've got to think of what does the most good for the most people. That's what laws and rules are for."

"So?"

"So, you've got to get rid of your law-breaker. You've got to get rid of this outlaw Haggarty that you and MacGregor hired to do your dirty work for you!" the Senator said.

"What laws has Haggarty been breaking, Addi-

son? ” I asked—not knowing of any he’d broke, but not doubting in the least that he’d been doing things I hadn’t heard about.

“ He’s got the whole damned county down on him,” Addison Pearce said, “ he’s got everybody wanting to nail his hide to the barn. He hasn’t actually broken any laws himself—but he’s stirring up a fight that’s going to aggravate people into bush-whacking or maybe lynching. He’s a bad one, this Haggarty. Better get rid of him, Harry—and do your own fighting inside the law.”

“ I know you mean well, Addison,” I told him, trying to be patient and not get mad—trying to see things his way. “ I’ll do as much for the law as it will do for me. I’ll meet it halfway and more. You get your sheriff and your court to clean things up and I’ll send Haggarty packing.”

“ What do you mean, Harry? ” Pearce asked.

“ Have the law get rid of all the gamblers in Dos Rios,” I told him, “ and have them run all the rustlers out of Jerktown, and have the county clerk publish the fact when land is declared open for homesteading so that local folks can homestead it instead of a lot of apple-knockers that didn’t help make this country. Do that, Addison—get this Johnny Casino, the Arizona outlaw that’s raising hell and rustling cattle and robbing banks, get him locked up and get the rustlers that

are stealing me blind locked up—and then talk to me about the law! ”

“ You always were a stubborn cuss,” Addison said; “ even at Lookout Mountain you didn’t know when you were whipped and wouldn’t have quit if Mac and I hadn’t dragged you away.”

“ Maybe you’re right,” I said—looking ’way back in my mind to that day when he and MacGregor had saved my life. “ Maybe I’m not seeing things in the right way. But I ain’t too old to learn—maybe you can show me. God knows I need to be shown—and I need some help, too.”

“ I’ll pull a few strings,” the Senator said. “ Maybe I can get the law on the job. You never know until you try. It might be that I could even get rid of this Johnny Casino for you.”

“ Thanks, Addison,” I told him. “ Have another hooker of kerosene before we eat? ”

“ Don’t care if I do,” the Senator said, pouring himself out three, four fingers in a glass. “ Mud in your eye, old friend. Hope the biscuits are good.”

The biscuits were good. Skinnymalink made ’em herself—and she gave us some wild honey she’d found in a bee tree. The chicken was crisp and tender—but I couldn’t enjoy it for thinking of Haggarty as I ate it. Those were the two young roosters that Haggarty had shot the heads off of—hardly without looking at them.

"You'd never guess how these roosters bit the dust, Senator," Skinnymalink said, sensing my thoughts like she could when she wanted to.

"You didn't wring their necks with those little hands, Anne," the Senator said. "They must have committed suicide."

"It was Haggarty," Skinnymalink said—just like a little kid bragging about something wonderful that one of the big boys had done. "He just sorta looked at them and thumbed the hammers on his gun, and there they were without any heads."

"Haggarty or no Haggarty they are very good eating," the Senator said, smacking his lips. "And I don't think you'll be troubled with Haggarty long. I think I can get rid of Johnny Casino for you, Harry, and that will eliminate the need of Haggarty. I'll see the Governor in a week or so."

"How can the Governor help?" I asked—but the Senator didn't even answer. He was so busy with the chicken—or maybe with his thoughts about how to get rid of Johnny Casino that he didn't even hear what I said.

But why the hell did he have to grin like a Cheshire cat while he was thinking? Ordinarily the Senator was a good poker player—but this time his thoughts were running all over his face and he was happy as hell with his plans for Johnny Casino.

Guess maybe he would still be grinning if Haggarty hadn't walked in and spoiled his thoughts.

"You know, Senator," Haggarty said, "you're a man after my own heart. I been listening outside the door for quite a spell—and I like the way you talk. I'll betcha we could go a long way together if you and me were fighting the same fight."

Senator Pearce looked at Haggarty for a spell—reckon it was the first time he'd seen him, for he studied him over good, not missing a line in his face or a wrinkle in his boots. And he looked into Haggarty's eyes for a long, long time.

"Sit down and have a chicken leg, Haggarty, or a breast—they're both right tender," the Senator said. "What makes you think we'd get along if we were both in on the same deal? "

"Just one little thing," Haggarty said. "You know what you want—and you know what the jiggers working for you got to do to get it for you. We could do each other a lot of good in this man's country, rough as it is."

The Senator studied Haggarty for a couple of minutes more before he answered—and I could see the same thing happen to him that had happened to Dan McBride and Skinnymalink and Carl Ressler. Yes sir—if looks could convince, the Senator began to like Haggarty in spite of himself.

"You know," he said, "I believe you're right. I reckon I've misjudged you, Haggarty."

"Oh, I'm a pretty bad egg," Haggarty grinned. "Likely there's some truth to what you've been hearing about me. But this water situation ain't as bad as it looked at first. There'll be water running in the Rio Grande before the day is over."

"You going to blast away that landslide, Johnny?" the Senator asked—how the hell he got to calling Haggarty "Johnny" so quick I couldn't figure out. Reckon that's the way politicians work and get votes.

"No, Senator, we can't do any blasting," Haggarty said, shaking his head. "Box Canyon is plumb full of rocks—there's a dam there that will back water up for ten miles into McBride's place. But I got forty-six nesters up there with their teams and plows and wagons. By sundown they'll have a little water running again."

"What do you mean by a little water?" the Senator asked.

"Oh—enough for the folks in Dos Rios to chase their whiskey with and wash their socks out in. It won't be much—just a trickle, maybe. They're scraping out a little ditch that will let water into the old river bed and it'll get to Dos Rios in a day or so."

"That's mighty nice of you, Johnny," the Senator said. "I'll tell the folks all about it when I get back to town. The Rio Chico has been dry since the last rain

and they'll be glad to know there's water on the way. I guess maybe you'll be getting the whole flow back into the Rio Grande pretty soon, the way those nesters are working? "

"Nope, I reckon not," Haggarty told him. "Them nesters pretend to be a pretty pious bunch—but they're really just sorta looking out for themselves. Soon as they see enough water running to take care of their own needs, they're apt to lose all interest in any more digging. No sir, I don't reckon the regular run off the Rio Grande will occur for a long, long time."

"Ummm, I see," the Senator said, sorta mulling that over in his mind for a spell. "Can't see any harm it will do, other than to McBride's place. Guess everybody else will be happy about it, so I reckon it's all right. McBride's only one man—and there are forty-six nesters and a couple thousand folks in Dos Rios. Guess it's the best thing for the most people at that. Have a couple more biscuits, Johnny, and another chunk of chicken! "

"Don't care if I do," Haggarty said, "don't care if I do. You know, Ma'am," he said to Skinnymalink, "just to look at you a man wouldn't suspect your capabilities! I'll bet there are a lot more virtues you've got that would come to light if a man put his mind to studying them! "

"Don't talk with your mouth full, Haggarty,"

Skinnymalink said, pretending to be cross with him but I could see she was tickled pink and trying to hide it. "I'm glad you like my cooking—it makes the cook feel good to see folks eat hearty. So eat hearty, Haggarty—tomorrow you may be dead!"

"Thanks, Miss Anne," Haggarty said, reaching for another chicken leg and spearing a couple of biscuits with his fork. "You might be right—in fact the odds are in your favor—so remember that the condemned ate a hearty meal!"

It seemed to me that Skinnymalink was only making fun with Haggarty—just rawhiding him a little to cover up the feelings growing in her that she didn't want him to see just yet. I knew Skinnymalink like a book, I thought, and knew the way her mind worked. I'd watched her ever since she was a little kid in three-cornered pants and thought I knew everything that went on in her head. I thought she was just rawhiding Haggarty—but I was wrong as hell. She was just playing her hunches—and she was warning Haggarty. Haggarty knew it, but I didn't!

Haggarty should have known better. The trail was too plain—a hundred odd steers driven toward the Pass with no attempt to hide their tracks. A tenderfoot would have known that something was going on—but Haggarty rode right into the trap, the way they wanted him to. He should have known better but they out-guessed him.

“They’ll catch us with our pants down,” Haggarty had told me, “and where we least expect it”—and that’s the way they got him, just two days after he’d eaten chicken with us.

He was too sure of himself—he always had an ace in the hole to top the other man’s king—and that’s how they got him! Whoever was ramrodding the deal was pretty foxy, I thought, after they told me how Haggarty got shot up!

The rustlers took a couple of potshots at the boys guarding those hundred prime steers we’d cut out to sell—Bill Pell and Bud Price and a couple of others. They were all pretty cool hands and they were out-

numbered and knew we didn't want 'em to get killed over a hundred head of steers—so they pounded leather for the ranch and more boys to help 'em fight the rustlers.

Haggarty and ten, twelve men saddled their horses and tore out up the trail in nothing flat. Got to the beginning of the Pass in about an hour behind the rustlers. The trail was easy to follow—ten men hazing along a hundred steers at a slow walk.

“You boys ride on up toward the Pass, slow and easy, watching every bend close so you don't get bush-whacked,” Haggarty told the boys, “and I'll cut up over Bald Knob and down the other side and save ten miles. I'll get 'em from the front while you boys shoot 'em up from in back. Do what Bill Pell tell's you—and don't shoot till you hear me start it, Bill.”

“You're the doctor,” Bill Pell said—and Haggarty was off, over Bald Knob, to ambush the rustlers.

But the rustlers outfigured Haggarty. They had a Mind amongst 'em, and that mind had been studying Haggarty and had him figured out to a “T”—they figured he'd come over the Bald Knob trail to outfox 'em.

They had a couple of jiggers with .30-.30s laying up behind some trees where the Bald Knob trail cut back into the trail through the Pass.

Haggarty must have put up a pretty good fight at

that, Bill Pell told me. Heard fifteen, twenty shots, Bill Pell did, before he and the boys got within shooting range of the rustlers and cut 'em down from the rear.

Haggarty had got his men, all right—killed them both with just his six-guns, he didn't have a rifle—but he soaked up a hell of a lot of lead doing it.

He must have just sat his horse and rode 'em down, letting them fill him full of rifle slugs until he got 'em both!

The iron guts of the man, I thought, looking at that shot up body they brought in, leaking blood like a sieve—blasted full of holes by soft-nosed slugs from .30-.30s, yet riding those rustlers down and finishing them off at forty, fifty feet before he collapsed!

If it 'hadn't been for Skinnymalink, Haggarty wouldn't have lived through the night—but she was born nine hundred years old and wiser than hell and knew what was going to happen—and she had Doc Brady out at the ranch almost as soon as they brought Haggarty in. Haggarty would have died before we stopped the bleeding if it hadn't been for Skinnymalink—but she took after her mother and used her head—she'd gone for the doctor the same time that the boys had started after the rustlers.

Skinnymalink put Haggarty to bed in her room—and she had the hot water and the towels and the bandages all ready for Doc Brady.

Yes sir—she saved Haggarty's life, Skinnymalink did—but she broke her own heart doing it. It was while she was nursing Haggarty that she got nosy and started looking in the back of Haggarty's watch.

If she hadn't been so blamed nosy she never would have looked in that watch and found the picture of the woman and the baby. She never would have known why Haggarty needed that two hundred a month for twenty years.

"Jennifer Jenkins—I wouldn't feel bad about her," Skinnymalink said, more thinking out loud than talking to me, "but a woman and a baby, that's different. They need him."

Yes sir, Skinnymalink broke her heart when she saved Haggarty's life—and a few days later, when she found out he was all tangled up with Red Ravenhill the gambler, it looked to her like Haggarty was the lowest form of human life.

And she was right!

There were a lot of funny goings-on at the Big Hat after Haggarty got bushwhacked. There were more different folks called on us than had come out to the ranch in all the thirty years I'd been running the biggest damned ranch in the territory.

Senator Pearce came out every two, three days to see how his new friend "Johnny" was getting along. Seemed quite taken by Haggarty, the Senator did, con-

sidering the way he'd been down on him before he knew him. Hadn't seen the Senator so regular since my wife, Anne, had died, twenty years before when Skinny-malink was born.

MacGregor came out once, too—hadn't seen MacGregor on a horse in ten, fifteen years—but he rented one to come and see for himself that Haggarty, the low-down son, was damned near dead, unconscious and raving his head off about "Lou" and the "Little Codger."

"He's a good man, this Haggarty," MacGregor told me. "One of the few Irishers I've seen any good in. Don't let anybody tell you any different, Harry. Take good care of him—he's worth the money you've got tied up in him."

"I've known you a long time, Mac," I told him, "and I have a Grade-A respect for what you say. You see more different men in a week than I do in a year. Likely you know more about folks than I do—but you haven't seen as much of Haggarty as I have. It could be that you're wrong, just this one time."

"Yes, it could be, Harry," MacGregor said. "You're here and you see things that I don't see. No doubt you're right and I'm wrong, man—but if Haggarty doesn't die, if he ever gets conscious enough to talk and listen, tell him that I was asking after him, will you?"

"Sure will, Mac," I told him.

Al Jenkins came by to ask about Haggarty, two or three days after Haggarty was shot up. First time Al Jenkins had come to the Big Hat ranch house since I ran him off twenty years back.

"Howdy, Mr. Benedict," Al said, looking sorta sheepish. "Fixed things up a little since I saw the place last."

"Yeh, things have changed a little, Al," I told him. "What's on your mind? "

"Just passing by," Al Jenkins said. "Thought I'd drop in to see how Haggarty was doing, and how things were going in general. Thought maybe you'd like to start contributing a little something for the welfare of us pore downtrodden rustlers up Jerktown way. We ain't got much longer to live, and our last days had ought to be spent enjoying the finer things of life, as I see it."

"You thinking of committing suicide, Al," I asked, "or has your leprosy done come back on you? "

"Nope, nothing pleasant like suicide or leprosy, Mr. Benedict," Al said. "Nothing we could sorta brace ourselves for. It's this jigger Haggarty. It's only a week or ten days until he's going to up and wipe us all out. Naturally, we want to live as high as we can and git all the fun out of it in them there ten days."

"Could be that Haggarty is going to do what he says and wipe you off the map," I told him—not believ-

ing what I was saying but trying to bluff it out. "My heart bleeds for you, Al."

"Yeah, I can imagine," Al Jenkins laughed in my face. "Likely Haggarty and the big band of angels he's flirting with right now will all come up to Jerktown and snap their fingers and we'll all go up in smoke. Likely they'll just spirit us away and we'll never be heard of again, Mr. Benedict. We ain't got a chance—that's why I think it's yore Christian duty to pay us off and see that we die happy."

"You got me over the barrel again, Al, damn your eyes," I told him, "and you know it. How much do you want?" Hell, I couldn't argue with him, with Haggarty knocking at death's door, like he was.

"Your hundred prime steers have drifted back on your range, somehow or other, Mr. Benedict," Al Jenkins said, "and none of my boys got killed when they were run off. Around four thousand dollars' worth of beef that you get back for nothing."

"All right," I said, reading his mind and opening the safe. "Here's your half-a-hundred nice shiny gold pieces—twenty bucks apiece. Two thousand suit you?"

"Yeah," Al said, pocketing his gold pieces. "Just about what I figured we'd need for the ten days of grace we got. See you in hell, Mr. Benedict."

"Not if I see you first," I told him—and I meant it.

Besides the Senator and MacGregor and Al Jenkins,

we had other visitors at the Big Hat while Haggarty was unconscious. Carl Ressler, the nester preacher, rode by to see how Haggarty was and promised to pray for him come Sunday.

Jennifer Jenkins dropped in to bring Haggarty some calves-foot jelly and worry Skinnymalink with those wise eyes of hers. Jennifer laughed, sorta kindly and friendly-like when Skinnymalink snapped at her.

And there was Ravenhill—Red Ravenhill, the gambler, who folks said was the no-account son of an English Lord. Red came out to the Big Hat in a buckboard pulled by a pair of Morgans with their tails pleated and ribbons tied around 'em—dressed to kill, Red was, with his long-tailed coat and his striped pants and a flower in his buttonhole. Brought Haggarty a bottle of Spanish brandy to get his strength back on—if *Haggarty lived!*

And Haggarty did live. In four days he was conscious, though the fever still burned strong in him. In five days he was arguing with Skinnymalink about more to eat. And in six days he was wondering what the hell had become of his watch. It was on the seventh day after he was bushwhacked that Haggarty really sat up and took notice—and told me to send for MacGregor. Didn't ask me, no sir—*Haggarty told me to send for MacGregor.*

Haggarty wrote a note and sealed it—and Bill Pell

took the note to Mac. Took a saddled horse along with him, so that Mac wouldn't lose any time renting one, I reckon.

MacGregor came back with Bill Pell, looking sorta tired and gaunted from his quick ride, but seeming pleased with himself, too. Mac talked with Haggarty a spell, had me put an envelope in the office safe that I'd bought when the Gem Bar went busted, drank a slug of rye and rode on back to town.

Mac had a lot of friends in Dos Rios. The cattlemen trusted him, the church folks knew he was honest, and the gamblers and bad-hats had thought a lot of him, too. So it was only natural that Mac had been the stake holder in the bet that Skinnymalink had made with the gamblers . . . her check for twenty thousand dollars against their I.O.U.'s for two hundred thousand that Haggarty wouldn't be alive on December 10th.

It was Skinnymalink's check and the gamblers' I.O.U.'s that were in the envelope that Mac put in the office safe. As usual, I was the last man to hear about it—the whole damned county knew before I did—but Bill Pell told me what it was all about the next day. He'd heard it on the grapevine—and that night there were even stranger doings at the Big Hat!

If it hadn't been for Skinnymalink's suspicious mind, I never would have thought of watching Haggarty for a couple of nights after we put the gamblers' I.O.U.'s in the safe—but she was sorta down on him after she found that picture of a woman and a baby in his watch. Reckon after that she didn't trust the dirty son any further than she could see him.

It's funny the way pictures work on people. She was sore as a boiled owl when she saw that picture and maybe read a lot of things from it that nobody else did—but it never once occurred to her that Haggarty would go snooping around among her pictures when he got better and find out a few things himself. About Jinglebob, for instance.

But Haggarty did find out, and it changed the whole pattern of things—but I'm getting ahead of my story again. Reckon I'd better stick to what happened the second night after MacGregor put the gamblers' I.O.U.'s in the safe at Big Hat Ranch.

I'd been thinking about Haggarty all day—mulling

him over in my mind, sorting the good from the bad, adding and subtracting—and I decided that outside of keeping me under his thumb and making me do what he wanted, Haggarty had done the Big Hat more good than harm.

Thinking it over I could not help but like him in a sneaking sort of a way, just like Skinnymalink and Carl Ressler and the Senator did without any of 'em wanting to. I was almost beginning to trust him when Skinnymalink changed my thinking for me.

“There isn't any good in that man, Dad,” she told me. “I've been thinking a lot the last day or so and I was wrong about things. Haggarty doesn't care two cents whether we win a lot of money from the gamblers or whether those I.O.U.'s get stolen or not. All he is interested in is Haggarty—he wants to save his own hide. He might even steal the I.O.U.'s himself and make a deal with the gamblers so they won't try to kill him again.”

“Somebody sure came close this time, Sis,” I told her. “If it hadn't been for you they would have got him and won their bets.”

“Yeah, it's funny,” Skinnymalink said, looking sorta sheepish. “I sorta saved him for selfish reasons, I guess—but it wasn't because of the money we'd win. I didn't even think about that. And that was before I'd found out about them—that woman and baby. Guess I

was beginning to take more than a passing interest in Mr. Ace-in-the-Hole Haggarty."

"Reckon it's a good thing you got on to him when you did," I said. "Likely saved you a lot of grief. Well—I'll sorta set up tonight and keep my eye peeled and see what goes on. You reckon Haggarty's able to walk? "

"Yes, I guess so," she said, sorta scouring her mind to remember all she'd seen and done and thought that day. "He was clear across the room when I took him his lunch. He was over looking at Jinglebob's picture—the one of him just before he went away."

"Haggarty know whose picture it was?" I asked.

"No, I don't think so," she said. "Guess I sorta misled him about that picture. But it made me feel better! "

"You tell him Jinglebob was your brother?" I asked.

"No," Skinnymalink giggled. "He asked who the man in the picture was and I told him it was a man I loved very, very much."

"Nothing untrue about that, was there, Sis?" I asked.

"Nope, pure unadulterated truth," she snickered, "but it kinda set Haggarty back on his heels. Do you suppose he was getting notions about me, Dad? "

"Wouldn't surprise me any," I said. "Can't tell

who the bug will bite. You're a right sassy-looking gal, Skinnymalink. Couldn't blame Haggarty for taking a second look at you."

"Anyway, you watch him close tonight, Dad," Skinnymalink told me, "and go easy on that one drink you've been pouring in the goldfish bowl. Better make it just an ordinary water-glass size tonight."

"I'll even go you one better than that," I told her, being so glad I could do something useful and sorta get my finger in the pie again that I didn't want a drink half as bad as I thought I did. "I'll have just an ordinary man-sized snort and let it go at that."

"See you in the morning, Dad," Skinnymalink said, "but don't get too blamed pious just because you think you're running things again. Make it a double man-sized snort."

"All right, Sis. See you in the morning," I answered.

I poured me my drink and got me a blanket and shoved my chair back in the corner where I could see the safe and the door to Haggarty's room by the light from the fireplace and still not be seen myself.

Nothing happened for hours, it seemed like, and I must have got tired and dozed off a little. The log in the fireplace burned through the middle and made quite a noise in dropping—and I reckon that's what woke me—for *the man twirling the dial on the safe was doing it as quiet as a mouse!*

It wasn't Haggarty. His back was to me but I could tell by the length of his hair and the slim build of his shoulders that it wasn't Haggarty. Whoever it was, his time was up, I figured. I was just thumbing back the hammer on my gun to potshot him when a voice spoke from the dark behind me.

"No need to fiddle around, Red," it was Haggarty talking; "the safe ain't locked. Help yourself to anything you want."

"Oh, I didn't know, Johnny." Ravenhill sounded almost like he was apologizing. "Thought you weren't able to get around and look out for yourself."

"Yeah, I can look out for myself," Haggarty said in a soft quiet voice like most fellows use when they talk to somebody they've known a long time and understand right well.

"No use of me going on, Johnny," Ravenhill said.

"Yeah, go ahead, Red," Haggarty told him. "I appreciate your trying to help me out. Take 'em and go out the window as quietly as you came in and nobody'll ever even know you were here."

"Right, Johnny," Ravenhill said, taking an envelope from the safe and easing out the window so quick that I didn't get to take the shot I wanted to take at him.

Guess it was a good thing I didn't shoot, I finally decided, for Haggarty would have fired at the gunflash, and Haggarty didn't miss. Thinking about it I got

sorta scared and kept right quiet—in fact I got scared as hell of Haggarty. I hardly breathed while he went over to the safe and put another envelope in it and locked it up.

He kinda shook as he walked, and he had to stop and hold on to a chair for a while coming back—but he finally settled down on the couch in the corner where it was dark.

It wasn't five minutes after Ravenhill left that I heard a horse snort outside in the dark—and pretty soon we had another visitor. He looked familiar, but the fire had burned low and he had his hat way down over his face—so I couldn't be sure who it was.

But it had to be one of two people—for there were only two guys beside me and Skinnymalink that knew the combination to that safe—and this jigger went right to it and clicked the dial around and opened the safe in nothing flat. He took the envelope Haggarty had put in there, looked at it to be sure that it was what he wanted. Then he locked the safe and was gone in less time than it takes to tell it.

I felt nine hundred years old and tired as hell. All at once I was licked—after sitting there in the dark and watching one of my old friends, one of the guys I would have trusted with my life, robbing my safe!

“Finish your drink, Mr. Benedict,” Haggarty said, tottering over and lighting a lamp. “Finish your

drink and have another one. Fact is, I'll have one with you! "

" You knew I was here all the time, Haggarty? " I asked gulping my drink and taking the other one he handed me.

" Yeah, you were asleep when I came in and I hated to wake you," Haggarty chuckled. " Here's regards."

We sat there a while, each one wrapped up in his own thoughts. Finally Haggarty spoke, more thinking out loud than talking. " You know, I think Ravenhill was trying to do us a favor, Mr. Benedict. I think he figured somebody would be after those I.O.U.'s and he'd look after 'em for us. So now things are narrowed down pretty close."

" What you mean, Haggarty? " I asked, already knowing, but wondering how much he knew.

" How many guys know the combination to your safe? " Haggarty asked me.

" Two."

" So that's a pretty narrow field," Haggarty said, " but it's one of your two good friends that's mixed up in all this. Which one, Mr. Benedict? "

" You mean to say you don't know? " I asked him. " Do you mean to sit there and tell me you aren't in cahoots with 'em yourself? Don't make me laugh, Haggarty."

" Do you think I'd be fool enough to get in on a deal

with folks that were trying to get me murdered?" Haggarty asked.

"No, I don't," I told him, "but they had no way of knowing at the start of things that Skinnymalink would up and make a damned fool bet like she did that might cost 'em two hundred thousand dollars."

"So you figure they've thrown me overboard to save their own hides, Mr. Benedict?" Haggarty said, looking very thoughtful and kinda pale there in the lamplight.

"Hell if he"—I couldn't bring myself to say Mac's name right out loud just then—"hell, if he'd rob a friend of twenty years' standing, he wouldn't bat an eyelash over killing a damned gun-slinger. How well you know Mac, Haggarty?"

"Can't say as I know him at all," Haggarty said, "but a guy I'd trust my life with said he was all right. You reckon he runs the gamblers?"

"Could be," I told him, too tired and too mixed up to think any more. "I reckon I'll go to bed and tomorrow give the damned ranch back to the Indians. It ain't worth the struggle."

"See you in the morning, Mr. Benedict," Haggarty said, handing me an envelope. "Here's your I.O.U.'s—better hide 'em away with your liquor bottle so as they'll be safe."

"You mean those were just dummies that Ravenhill

made off with? And those that Mac, or whoever it was—they weren't real either?" I asked.

"Mr. Benedict, you amaze me sometimes," Haggarty said. "The way you catch onto things is plumb astounding. You going to get up early in the morning?"

"Yeah, reckon I could make a point to," I said.

"Send Bill Pell into town, will you," Haggarty asked, "and have him nose around a little. Whoever got those phony I.O.U.'s will know it by then, and he'll know we're getting wise to him. He'll likely try something new or do something different—and I'd like Bill to be there and see what which of your friends does. See you tomorrow."

Haggarty tottered off to his bed in the room that had been Skinnymalink's, shined his lamp on Jinglebob's picture a minute and then was asleep the minute he hit the bed.

I didn't go to sleep. My mind was working too hard—and the first thing I knew it was getting light and I hadn't figured anything out. I was still as mixed up in my thinking as when I'd started. Forget it, I told myself, and see what happens in Dos Rios today.

I sent Bill Pell to town right after breakfast and he was back by noon, all excited.

"Well, looks like things were easing up a little for us, Mr. Benedict," Bill said. "They're done gone and

arrested Johnny Casino. Reckon stealing and rustling will sorta taper off now."

"How could they arrest Johnny Casino?" I asked. "He ain't got nothing proved against him. Folks suspect him, but there's not enough proof to convict him."

"Senator Pearce fixed it up," Bill Pell said. "Got him on an Arizona charge. The Senator wired the Governor at Santa Fe and he agreed to extraditing Johnny Casino. They're holding him for the Arizona sheriff. Caught Johnny cold they did—he was in the Gem Bar having a drink and was too surprised to even pull a gun."

"Reckon you stopped in to have a drink with MacGregor before you came home?" I asked, trying to find out something without asking.

"Hell, it ain't no sin to take a drink, is it?"

"No, reckon not."

"Yeah, I had a drink," Bill admitted, "but I had it in the Gem. Drank Haggarty's health with Ravenhill."

"How come you didn't drink at MacGregor's like you generally do?" I asked.

"What is this, a trial or something?" Bill Pell asked, looking at me kinda funny. "I like Mac's liquor better than anybody's, I'll admit—but when Mac's place ain't open, I'll be damned if I'll do without."

"Reckon Mac slept late and ain't going to open up until night," I said.

"Hell, Mac was up before daylight," Bill Pell said, "caught the six-thirty train, the station agent told me. Said he was going to Arizona for a week or ten days."

So that was what was goin' on.

One friend helping me—one trying to pull me down. The Senator getting Johnny Casino jailed—and Mac-Gregor leaving the country!

Haggarty laughed when he heard the news. Looked right pleased and asked me to bring his warbag up from the bunkhouse. I had it brought up and he lay there in the bed that had been Skinnymalink's, grinning from ear to ear, cleaning some guns and oiling them, thumbing the hammers and getting the feel of the guns again.

Grinning like a Cheshire cat all the time, Haggarty was—like a kid playing with a toy he'd just got after wanting it a long, long time.

I sat there and watched him for a spell, wondering what the hell was going on in his mind, and never once thinking to look at the guns he was cleaning.

It wasn't until that night, after Haggarty had gone to town, that I found out they were Jinglebob's guns! And then I had to go and kill Haggarty! For those guns had been taken from Jinglebob's body when he was left to die out there in Arizona!

Yes sir, it was a boogery night, just like I said at the start—when Haggarty came cat-footing down the hall with those strange .38s swinging at each hip. The moon was so bright it was almost like day and the clouds threw queer-looking shadows across it that played around the bunkhouse and the blacksmith shop like men creeping up to finish Haggarty off through the window.

The fever still burned strong in him, like I told you, and his eyes were as bright as the diamond in Ravenhill's stickpin—but he looked ten years younger than when I'd first met him. Young and clean-looking, like he didn't have a care in the world.

I never would have heard him coming, he was walking so light and easy, if it hadn't been for that damned song he was singing—all about the pale moon shining above the green mountain.

Skinnymalink heard him coming too, heard the song—and a strange, far-away look came into her eyes, like her mind was going away back and remembering

things she liked to remember—but there was a puzzled look on her face, too, like she couldn't quite figure things out just right.

Skinnymalink noticed the strange guns Haggarty was wearing right off.

"Those aren't your regular man-killing guns, Mr. Haggarty," she sneered at him. "You going frog hunting in the moonlight?"

"No, Miss Anne," he answered her, polite as hell. "No frogs. Maybe a few night crawlers. Good evening, Mr. Benedict," he said to me. "Nice night for a killing."

"Nice night for a murder, Haggarty," I told him. "Better get back in bed. You haven't got the strength to thumb a hammer—let alone sit a horse long enough to get to town, where I gather you think you are going."

"Sorry, Mr. Benedict," Haggarty said, "but I got things to do."

"They'll keep," I told him. "You haven't got the chance of a snowball in hell in Dos Rios and you know it. You're worth two hundred thousand dollars—*dead*—to the gamblers. Tiny McBride is well and on the prod for you—and likely Al Jenkins has a few boys in town to see if they can bust Johnny Casino out of jail. You won't last even five minutes in Dos Rios, Haggarty!"

"Afraid to risk the odds, huh?" Haggarty asked me, laughing at me with his eyes that burned so bright.

"Yes, damn your eyes," I yelled at him. "I'm afraid of the odds. I've got twenty thousand dollars tied up in you, Haggarty. You own the water I need, you're supposed to be helping me straighten out my ranch—and you won't do me a damned bit of good dead."

"Sorry, Mr. Benedict," Haggarty said, not looking the least bit sorry, "but I got things to do—I've been waiting a long, long time—and this is the night I want to do them."

His eyes were as bright and happy as a kid's on Christmas eve looking forward to a big tomorrow. He didn't look at all like Killer Haggarty—the fever had burned away the hard lines left by fighting and shooting and being in prison—and left him looking young and clean again. He looked like a clean young cowpuncher in his best shirt going to town on payday night.

Skinnymalink noticed it too, and softened up a little. "Better get some heavier artillery, Haggarty," she told him. "No use going bear hunting with a switch."

"These thirty-eights will do fine, Miss Anne," Haggarty answered. "They're good guns. I've been saving them for this night. They'll shoot where I point 'em and stop what I shoot at. They're light and fast and fancy."

"That's the way you feel, huh, Haggarty?"

Skinnymalink asked, speaking almost kindly to this killer whose guts she hated.

“That’s the way I feel, Miss Anne,” Haggarty told her, “light and fast and fancy. Well, good night. See you in hell, Grandpop,” he added to me—and was gone. I could hear him singing all the way down to the corral—all about the pale moon shining above the green mountain—and pretty soon I could hear his horse fancy-footing off into the night just like it had caught his don’t-give-a-damn spirit.

It must have been the fever in him, I thought—making him so brave and reckless—letting himself get sucked into a trap that anybody could see through. It must have been the fever—for Haggarty had proved as crooked as a dog’s hind leg and as cagy as they come. He’d almost seemed yellow at times—and maybe he was—the trouble he took to dodge a fight and save his own skin when the odds were wrong. He’d stayed off the ridges in the daytime and out of lighted windows at night and he hardly ever slept twice in the same place. He’d taken talk from men that weren’t half as fast as he was with a six-gun—talk that I never would have taken from men twice as fast as me. Yes sir, he’d lied and sneaked and eaten crow to stay alive when the odds were wrong—and yet there he was, going up against a hundred to one percentage and happy about it. It didn’t add up right.

"Something's wrong with all this," I told Skinny-malink. "Our yellow-bellied killer shouldn't be doing this. There must be a joker in the deck somewheres."

Skinnymalink didn't answer right off. She got out her blamed knitting and fooled with it for a spell and didn't say a word for a long, long time. Finally she put her knitting away and started humming that damned song Haggarty had been singing—all about the moon shining above the green mountain—and pretty soon her eyes lit up like a couple of stars and she went and got her hat and sheepskin coat.

"It all adds up pretty good, Dad, if you know what to add to what," she said. "Think I'll go on into town and keep score on this deal. Looks like this is Haggarty's night to settle for his sins and I want to be there and see what goes on. Wouldn't miss it for the world."

"What's it all about, Sis?" I asked her.

"Long story, Dad," she said, "and I haven't time to stop and draw you a picture. But remember those guns Haggarty had tonight—remember whose they were if you can, and maybe the whole thing will add up for you after a while. Don't wait up for me, Grandpop"—and Skinnymalink was gone, too.

What the hell goes on, I wondered—first Haggarty looking ten years younger and not half as mean as he used to. And him calling me "Grandpop"—and then

Skinnymalink calling me "Grandpop," too, and running off to town to see Haggarty get his hide nailed to the barn.

Hell, she couldn't be in that kind of trouble, I thought—she wouldn't want to see him killed if she was!

Remember those guns, she'd said—remember whose .38s were swinging at Haggarty's hips. All at once I remembered where I'd seen 'em before and whose guns they were and I couldn't sit there any longer.

"Jose," I yelled at the stable boy, "get me that buckboard here in five minutes flat or I'll kick the seat of your pants up between your ears!"

I couldn't sit there—I had to get to Dos Rios before they rubbed Haggarty out. I had to take a shot at him myself, the low-down son. Those were Jinglebob's .38s Haggarty was carrying. The guns Jinglebob had worn the day he died in the prison break—the guns he'd taken so much time looking for in the warden's office that he got wounded in the get-away. They were the guns Skinnymalink had given Jinglebob on his twenty-first birthday—but they weren't on his body when they found him. The guy that had gone off and left Jinglebob to die in the desert had taken them.

It all added up—it was Haggarty that had saved his own skin and left Jinglebob to hold off the posse with a rifle and die in the desert while Haggarty got away.

So now you see why I had to get to town before Haggarty was killed—I had to try to get him myself—and if I couldn't kill him at least I had to die trying. Jinglebob would have wanted it that way. A man's got to avenge his own son!

What if I did get killed, I thought—hell, there was water running in the Rio Grande again, and my ranch was in damned fine shape. Skinnymalink could sell out for enough to keep her the next hundred years if she wanted to!

But she didn't want to! For by the time I got to Dos Rios in my buckboard all hell had broken loose and knocked my plans for Skinnymalink end over appetite!

Yeah, it's just like you expected—it was Haggarty that upset my appplecart when I got to Dos Rios. Haggarty and Ravenhill. The damned fools bailed Johnny Casino out of jail!

Ravenhill put up the money—and Haggarty talked Judge O'Malley into it somehow. O'Malley had the reputation of being none too honest—and I reckon the sight of all that bail money must have given him ideas about how it might not get on the records somehow or other.

Something funny had happened to Skinnymalink, too, when I got to town. Maybe she'd had a couple of drinks, I dunno—although it wasn't like her. She was in Ravenhill's when I got there—sitting on top of the piano singing that damned song about the pale moon shining above the green mountain. The customers had all gone home, it being damned near daylight, and there were just the two of 'em there—and Ravenhill.

Haggarty's hide wasn't nailed to the barn. He wasn't dead, even shot up. He was just sitting there, happy as

hell, picking out that damned song with two fingers on Ravenhill's piano, grinning up at Skinnymalink, just like a damned Cheshire cat. Just like he'd been grinning that afternoon when he was oiling Jinglebob's guns.

"Get up and pull your guns, Haggarty, damn your eyes," I yelled at him. "Much as I hate your guts, I can't shoot you sitting down."

"Sit down yourself, Grandpop," Haggarty laughed, without even looking around, "sit down and pour yourself a drink!"

"Pull, Haggarty," I yelled, not being able to wait any longer, "pull or I'll blast you in the back."

I was standing about ten feet to the left of the piano where Haggarty was sitting. I'd taken off my coat so I could pull my gun quick. Figured I could get it out of my hip pocket in nothing flat—but I misjudged those .38s, light and fast and fancy, just like Haggarty had said they were.

I saw Haggarty's hand move and reached for my gun—but wham—it wasn't there! Haggarty's shot cut my suspenders as pretty as you please, my pants plunked down around my ankles and I just sorta collapsed on the floor! Me, the owner of the biggest damned ranch in the territory, looking like a clown. It must have been funny as hell—but nobody laughed.

Skinnymalink helped me up. "Pull up your pants and take it easy, Grandpop," she said, drawing me up a

chair by the piano and leading me to it. I was too stunned to resist, and I sat down and took the drink they gave me and sat there getting myself together. Haggarty and Skinnymalink went right on with their damned song, taking in the pale moon and the green mountain. They set the sun in the sea and walked through the valley and did all sorts of things before my mind cleared up and I remembered away back before I'd got so damned ambitious and built up the biggest damned ranch in the territory.

My wife used to sing that song, my wife Anne. She used to sing it to Jinglebob when he was just a little tyke. Mostly when he was tired and stubborn and didn't want to take his nap.

All at once the puzzle straightened out. The pieces just sorta fell into place and I saw it all, clear as crystal—but I was still as stubborn as hell. I got out my watch, with Jinglebob's picture in the back, and opened it up and laid it on the piano.

"Cut out that damned racket, Haggarty," I said, "and open up your watch."

"A pleasure, Mr. Benedict," Haggarty said, grinning like a damned schoolboy, laying his watch on the piano beside mine—open so I could see the picture of the woman and the baby in the back of it.

There was no mistaking the likeness—to me it seemed a miracle, almost!

"Where is he, Haggarty?" I asked in a small, quiet voice.

"Where is who, Mr. Benedict?" Haggarty laughed at me.

"My grandson, damn your soul!" I yelled at him.

"Little Jinglebob? Oh, he's over in Arizona. MacGregor went to get him this morning. Likely they'll be back in two, three days," Haggarty told me.

"Well, I'll be damned," I said, hardly being able to believe it, but knowing it was true. Me—I had a grandson, a little reproduction of my own son—a second Jinglebob. It took a little time to soak in, to get it straight in my mind—and it took a lot of questions and answers, too.

"You knew Jinglebob pretty well, Haggarty?" I asked.

"Yeah, pretty well, Mr. Benedict!" Haggarty said.

"How did he die, Haggarty?" I asked, wanting to know—wanting to get this question of guns straight in my mind.

"He died alone, in the desert, with a hole in his guts you could put your fist through! He died like a man—holding off the posse while his best friend got away. He knew he was going to die—knew he didn't have a chance! And he knew the posse would get his friend, too, if this friend stayed back to look after him."

"Who was this friend, Haggarty?" I asked.

"Johnny Casino," Haggarty said.

"That why you bailed Johnny Casino out tonight?" "I asked still not understanding it all.

"Yes, and no, Mr. Benedict," Haggarty said. "I bailed this guy out so I could kill him!"

"You've got your chance, Haggarty," a voice sneered in back of us—and we all whirled around to look right into the face of two .45s! It was this so-called Johnny Casino, the man Haggarty had bailed out, mean drunk like some men get—his nerves whetted to a razor's edge by the liquor.

"Johnny Casino," Haggarty sneered; "why you aren't even a good imitation, Brunson. You can't get away with it—you're a false alarm, Brunson."

"So it's you after all," Brunson marveled. "They told me it was, but I didn't believe it. The boys will laugh when I tell 'em how you died!"

"I've been waiting three years for this night, Brunson," Haggarty said to Johnny Casino. Calling him Brunson, but talking to Casino—didn't make sense, but that's the way it was. "For three long years I've killed you every day in my mind—and now I'm going to do it. Duck, folks!"

We ducked and Haggarty's hands flipped up his holsters and plunked two shots square in Johnny Casino's heart. The light pop of the .38s were drowned out by the heavy boom of Johnny Casino's .45s.

It was all so quick I hardly saw it—but there we were, the three of us flat on the floor—Haggarty had ducked too when he shot and Johnny Casino's slug went over all of us. Johnny Casino looked kinda startled, coughed up blood and fell to the floor.

"Well, that's that, Mr. Benedict!" Haggarty said, getting up and bracing himself against the piano. He was still pretty weak and shaky and had to pull himself together. "That's the man that shot Jinglebob in the guts so he could take his horse to get away on. That's the man, the low-down son. May he rot in hell!"

It didn't make sense to me. Hell, Johnny Casino was supposed to have been Jinglebob's friend—Haggarty had just said so!

"Look," I said, not understanding, "draw me a picture, will you? You just told me Johnny Casino was Jinglebob's best friend—and yet you kill him. Draw me a picture, Haggarty!"

"Hell, Mr. Benedict," Haggarty snapped at me, "can't you understand plain English! Johnny Casino was Jinglebob's best friend—but that guy lying there in his own blood ain't Johnny Casino. *I am*. My father was a steamboat gambler out of Natchez—and he loved his work. He had me christened *John Casino Haggarty*!"

Shooting was no novelty in Dos Rios. Nobody even bothered to poke their heads into Ravenhill's place to see what it was all about when Haggarty blasted that fake Johnny Casino—and I was damned glad of it, for there were a lot of things I wasn't sure of, and a lot of questions I wanted Haggarty to answer.

"Why the hell didn't you tell me about little Jinglebob sooner, Haggarty?" I asked him. "Could have done me a big favor and saved yourself a lot of trouble, too."

"Shucks, I didn't even know Jinglebob had a family anywheres," Haggarty said. "He didn't go by the name of Benedict—and he never mentioned his past. Only once did I ever hear him say anything about what he'd done before I met him."

"What was that Haggarty?" Skinnymalink asked. "Did he say something about me?"

"Nope, Miss," Haggarty laughed, "it was about Jennifer Jenkins. He didn't mention her name but I reckon it must have been her. Said he wanted to marry

an outlaw's daughter once—but she laughed in his face and told him to marry one of his own kind that hadn't been so careless with herself, that he'd be happier that way. And he did. Reckon this Jennifer has her good points at that, Miss Anne."

"Guess she's honest anyway, Johnny," Skinny-malink said. "What kind of a girl did Jinglebob marry?"

"Eastern girl," Haggarty said, "out in Arizona for her health. Refined as hell, but not snooty about it. She was a damned good cook, too, Ma'am—and she took right good care of Jinglebob. She didn't get any too strong after little Jinglebob was born—and Jinglebob had to do most of the looking after the kid. That's where I learned that song your old man don't like so well. All about the pale moon—Jinglebob used to sing it to the kid of nights when he didn't want to go to sleep!"

"Reckon that's what you wanted the two hundred a month for, son," I said, surprised at myself—calling that ornery galoot "son." "Guess you been taking care of Jinglebob's family for him. Guess that's why you were so darned yellow-looking sometimes—couldn't afford to get yourself killed."

"Yeah, that's right, Grandpop," Haggarty said, and I sorta liked the sound of it, "Grandpop"!

"How come you and Jinglebob to turn outlaws,

Haggarty? ” I asked. “ Sounds like he must have been happy. You get him mixed up in it, or what? ”

“ I better tell the story from the start,” Haggarty said. “ Make it as short as I can. Me and Jinglebob met in the Spanish War. Sorta liked each other on sight, I reckon. We did a lot of fighting together and saved each other’s bacon a time or two. We raised hell together and got drunk together—and we talked a lot. We decided civilization was coming to the west and sooner or later there wouldn’t be no open ranges.”

“ Looks like you were right,” Skinnymalink butted in.

“ Yeah, it does,” Haggarty admitted. “ Anyways, we decided to homestead us some land, so we went out to the Black River Valley—and turned nesters. Just plain, low-down nesters—but we got us a section near the river that we could irrigate, and we leased us fifteen, twenty more sections to run cows on. We fattened the cows on what we raised and were making a pretty good living. We were doing all right until the Amalgamated moved in.”

“ Not the same Amalgamated that moved in here? ” I asked.

“ Not the same name—they called it the Consolidated over there, but it was the same guys that owned it. Anyways, they pretended to be cattlemen, but they didn’t run hardly any stock—and the first thing you know

there was a big fight on between the nesters and the cattlemen. Haystacks got burned, cattle got killed out of pure meanness—fences got cut and herds stampeded through nesters' crops. There was hell to pay—there wasn't a nester family that hadn't lost some of its men-folks."

"Sounds like somebody was playing both sides against the middle," Skinnymalink butted in again.

"You are right, Miss Anne," Haggarty said, "only we didn't know it until it was too late. Jinglebob and I came in from the range one night and passed two strangers riding down the road, about a mile from his place. When we got there the house was on fire and Jinglebob's wife and kid were sitting there on a wheelbarrow, the only thing left that wasn't on fire."

"So you both lost your heads, huh, Johnny?" Skinnymalink asked.

"Yeah—we lost our heads—and how long have you been calling me Johnny?" Haggarty wanted to know.

"Oh, that'll keep till Grandpop goes to sleep," Skinnymalink said, with no more shame than a newborn babe. "Get on with the story."

"We rode after those two guys until we caught 'em. We gave 'em an even break, but they weren't as mad as we were. And the sheriff came out and we couldn't prove these guys did it—so we were wanted for murder. We left Jinglebob's wife and kid in Phoenix with some

friends—and we joined up with Argentina Ed for a spell. Only way we could make a living in Arizona.”

“You do much robbing or killing, Johnny?” Skinnymalink asked, trying to find out what kind of a guy she was warming up to, I reckon.

“No, we mostly just rustled enough stuff to eat on and buy a few shells,” Haggarty said. “Others joined us that had been froze out on both sides—and when the Consolidated bought out near every place in the valley we discovered what damned fools we’d been.”

“How’s that, Haggarty?” I asked, not quite following him.

“This Consolidated was in the cattle business just for show,” Haggarty said. “What they really wanted was all that good rich black River Valley land. Hell—there was millions of acres of it that could be irrigated by building ’em a dam. And they wanted to buy it cheap. So they set everybody at everybody else’s throats—and pretty soon those that weren’t killed off were broke and sold out cheap. Argentina Ed had an honest brother that was one of ’em—so Ed sorta sided with us and helped us wipe out the Consolidated.”

“How did you do that, Haggarty?” I asked.

“This Ed was a pretty cagey jigger,” Haggarty said, “and he made us lay low until the Consolidated got themselves all spread out. They spent hundreds of thousands of dollars building ’em a dam, and digging

canals and a short line railroad down the valley to joining the Southern Pacific. We let 'em get all through—get all their money spent. He was pretty smart, Ed was.”

“ Sounds like he might have made an honest living if he'd wanted to,” Skinnymalink thought out loud.

“ Bet he could, but he was a wild one, too,” Haggarty said. “ Anyways, we let them get spread out good—sank all their money. And then we set their commissaries and warehouses on fire. And while they were trying to put out the fires, we dynamited their dam all to hell. Washed out their dinky railroad and all their canals. They didn't have a thing to sell the suckers at a hundred and fifty bucks an acre like they'd planned.”

“ Must have been kinda risky, dynamiting a big dam like that,” I said. “ They must have had guards.”

“ They did,” Haggarty said, “ and that's where we got caught. Jinglebob and Brunson and I—got caught by the deputies. Argentina Ed got killed. We were in the State pen for three weeks before we were convicted on the old murder charge and sentenced to hang. I had a little money Ed had given me just before he died—and we bribed a guard.”

“ But Jinglebob had to go back for the guns his sister gave him,” Skinnymalink said, with a far-away look in her eyes. “ And to think—I saved my allowance for three months to buy 'em.”

“ Yeah, that’s how it was,” Haggarty said. “ He got wounded through the shoulder, but he got away. I held up the posse a while at San Lorenzo Pass to let him and Brunson get a little farther ahead and tie up his wound. But when I caught up with ’em I found Brunson’s horse with a broken leg. Stepped in a prairie dog hole. And Jinglebob had a hole through his belly you could put your fist through.”

“ Brunson shot him for his horse? ” I asked.

“ Yeah, a plain, cold-blooded shooting,” Haggarty said, looking mean and hard again. “ We got along for a spell on one horse—but Jinglebob was losing blood too fast, and you don’t live long with a hole like that in you anyways. ‘ Leave me at the next narrow pass, Johnny,’ Jinglebob said. ‘ I’m good for an hour more, anyways. You can get over the line in an hour.’ ”

“ Guess that’s all you could do, Haggarty,” I said. “ Reckon I would have done the same thing in the same circumstances.”

“ I didn’t want to do it, Mr. Benedict.” Haggarty was damned near crying now. “ Hell, he was my best friend. I should have stayed there and died with him. I wanted to—but he wouldn’t have it. He knew he was going to die and he wanted somebody to take care of his wife and kid. That’s why I finally took his thirty-eights—he wanted me to keep ’em for little Jinglebob—and rode off and left him plunking away at the posse

with his thirty-thirty. He must have lasted his hour, all right—for they never did catch up with me.”

“What did you do then, Haggarty?” Skinnymalink asked.

“I headed for the New Mexico line,” Haggarty said, “and I did the hardest, quickest thinking a man ever did in his life. I decided that there had to be an end to Johnny Casino—that I had to forget how I hated Brunson and hang up my guns and earn an honest living for Jinglebob’s family!”

“So?”

“So I rode my horse out into the quicksand in the Rio Chino, right near the New Mexico line. I hung my hat on a bush like it had floated down and got caught. I stirred up the sand like there’d been a hell of a struggle. Then I shot my horse.”

“So Johnny Casino was drowned in the Rio Chino, huh?” Skinnymalink asked.

“Yes,” Haggarty said, “and he should have rested in peace. But somebody resurrected him, seems like.”

“So you worked for a sawmill in Alamogordo,” Skinnymalink said, “and became old Honest Haggarty.”

“That was me,” he answered, “Honest Haggarty—and I’d still be doing it if you folks hadn’t come along and showed me how to kill two birds with one stone. Johnny Casino was the strongest bait there, too.”

"How's that, Haggarty?" I asked him.

"The picture you painted of the troubles down here at the Big Hat sounded just like that I'd gone through in Arizona—and the name Johnny Casino being mixed up in it sounded like some of the jiggers I would like to meet up with would be mixed up in it. That's why I wanted the two hundred bucks a month for twenty years—so that if something happened to me Jinglebob's family would be taken care of just the same."

"Why didn't you kill this Johnny Casino right off and forget it, instead of waiting around so long?" Skinnymalink asked.

"Because this ranch wasn't in any shape to keep its promises—I found that out after I got here and it was too late to go back to being Honest Haggarty again. I had to pull you out of the hole you were in so you'd be able to pay off for twenty years. You were about licked, Mr. Benedict, and just didn't know it. That's all."

"I never would have believed that MacGregor would have been so conniving in planning all the mess we were in and engineering it all," I marveled—wondering how I'd ever figured Mac so wrong.

"Don't be silly, Dad," Skinnymalink said.

"No, use your old, hard head, Grandpop," Haggarty laughed. "Mac's got a heart of gold. Hell, he's helped every down and out cowhand in seventeen coun-

ties. He's off in Arizona rounding up your grandson and daughter-in-law right now! "

" So it was Addison, after all? " I asked—stunned by the news—but glad it wasn't Mac, for Mac had saved my life at Lookout Mountain.

" Yeah, Grandpop. It was the Senator that planned it all and worked it out," Haggarty told me, pouring me another drink. " It was your old and trusted friend, hand-shaking Senator Pearce."

" How very interesting, Haggarty," Senator Pearce said from Ravenhill's office, a cocked shotgun in his hand. " How very interesting. Raise your hands, gentlemen! "

" You don't deny it, do you, Senator? " Haggarty said, pale and weak-looking and knowing he was in danger.

" Oh no, Haggarty," the Senator said, " I admit it, every bit of it. But I want to know how you figured it out—before I kill you, Haggarty! "

“Caught with our pants down, that’s what I told you once, Mr. Benedict,” Haggarty said, “and when and where we least expect it. Mind if I sit down?” he asked the Senator. “I’m still kinda weak from your bushwhacking job. You sure planned it neat. I fell right into your trap, all right.”

“You flatter me, Haggarty,” the Senator said, “but it won’t get you anywheres. And it’s too bad, in a way—you and I could do big things together.”

“Yeah, we could,” Haggarty said, “but it’s too late now. You’ll have to kill me, Senator.”

“That’s right,” the Senator said, “and it’s a shame. But tell me how you got on to me.”

“It all followed the same pattern you used over in Arizona,” Haggarty said, “Cattleman’s Association, nesters, river with lots of water in it, good place to build a dam, lots of good fertile land. Even a short-line railroad already built.”

“Sounds simple as you tell it,” the Senator admitted, “but how did you pin it on to me?”

"It was Mr. Benedict's tally book that put me wise. The Big Hat had been losing above seven hundred steers a year, ever since the Amalgamated started their ranch. So I watched the Amalgamated, and there wasn't a steer rustled through their place."

"So you started thinking seriously," the Senator said, with almost a note of admiration in his voice.

"Yeah, I started thinking," Haggarty said. "I got to wondering who wasn't earning much money and was spending quite a bit. I got checking around and found out Senators don't make a hell of a lot of money, and that your ranch didn't run much stock—and yet you seemed to have plenty of money all the time."

"Very simple deductions, Haggarty," the Senator said. "So you started watching your fences where the Big Hat joined my place."

"Exactly," Haggarty told him, "and I found out that you weren't stealing seven hundred steers all in one bunch. Not even a hundred, or fifty. You were smart, Senator—you just took two every day, so they would scarcely be noticed. Smart—that's what you were. That's the way I would have done it myself if I'd been in your shoes."

"A man as smart as you are, Haggarty," the Senator said, "well—he might be strongly influenced by one little incident like a couple of steers being rustled through my place—but he wouldn't form a positive

opinion from it. There must have been something else that really made up your mind that I was the man behind all this plotting and planning! ”

“ Yeah, there was,” Haggarty told him. “ Last week somebody had me bushwhacked but didn’t get me quite killed. Last night somebody that knew the combination to the Big Hat safe rifled it—but didn’t quite get what he was looking for. And this morning that jigger got worried as hell, and took the only way left to get rid of me—he got Johnny Casino extradited to Arizona and arrested all in the same day. He sold a friend down the river! ”

“ How would that get rid of you, me selling Brunson down the river? ” the Senator asked.

“ Because somehow, Senator Addison Pearce,” Haggarty sneered at him, “ you knew I was Johnny Casino—but you didn’t want me to know you knew it. So you got the papers all fixed up for extraditing this phony—figuring to work a switch somehow and get me out of your way after the extradition was granted by the Governor. Nice little scheme, Senator—it still might work, only Johnny Casino is dead, as far as the law is concerned—lying right there in his own blood, practically under your feet! ”

“ You’re a clever jigger, Haggarty,” the Senator said. “ You should have been working for me. We’d both be rich by now. Why didn’t you call in the sheriff

and have me put in jail when you knew about the rustling? ”

“ Nobody would have believed me,” Haggarty said, “ you’ve got too much influence and I ain’t overly liked. The only way I could whip you was to bust up your influence.”

“ So you went to work on my influence,” the Senator said. “ You’re away ahead of me, Haggarty. How did you bust that up? ”

“ I haven’t yet, and it looks like maybe I wouldn’t,” Haggarty said, “ but I sure as hell tried. First I set a deadline for the Jerktown rustlers to get out—and then I had Bill Pell go and make a bet that I’d keep my word. That made all those gamblers, that pay you half of what they make, perk up and lay a lot of money on the line that I wouldn’t live to run the rustlers out. Hell, they got everything they own bet—and they’ll go broke if they lose. So will you, Senator.”

“ But they won’t lose,” the Senator said, waving his shotgun; “ you’ll be dead in just a little while. How else did you try to bust up my influence? ”

“ Well, there were those nesters. Forty-six of ’em, that you brought out here with big promises, hoping to get them mixed up with the cattlemen and against the Big Hat. I beat ’em to the water you’d promised ’em—and then I gave it back to them better than they’d hoped for. Got me forty-six votes there, Senator! ”

"Very good planning, Haggarty," the Senator said, "very good planning, and I'm the one to acknowledge it. That all? "

"Yeah—that and human nature, Senator," Haggarty said. "Outside of Benedict and MacGregor you don't have one damned good friend in the county. Oh, you've got a lot of people you've done favors, and there are a lot of folks that make their money because you protect 'em—but you haven't got one honest to God friend left, Senator—and a man can't get along without friends. You lose your money tomorrow and you lose your influence."

"I think maybe you are right," the Senator told him. "In fact, I'm sure you are. But that's the way politics are. You do a man a favor and he pays you for it. Hard way, but true. Any letters you want to write or any last words you want to deliver? "

"No, thank you," Haggarty said. "Skinnymalink already knows how much I think of her and Mr. Benedict called me 'son' a while ago. Reckon there are no messages, Senator."

"Come in, boys, and tie them up," the Senator said and Al Jenkins and five or six of his boys came in. "Tie them all up and put them on horses—all except Haggarty. You want to shoot him, Al, or you'd rather I did it? "

"You better do it, Mr. Pearce," Al Jenkins said. "I

ain't got nothing against him and the idea sorta turns my stomach."

So they tied us up—me and Skinnymalink—but somehow in the discussion they'd missed one bet. Reckon the Senator was so blamed interested in having Haggarty tell him where he'd gone wrong that he overlooked Ravenhill. Red was sitting over in the corner where he wouldn't be eavesdropping on what we said—he was a polite son of a gun, Red was—and when the Senator raised his shotgun to let Haggarty have it, Ravenhill shot out the light. I saw him pull the derringer from his sleeve—I saw the lights go out and I heard the crash Haggarty made going through the window!

But that's all I remember. When I came to I was still tied up—but I wasn't in Ravenhill's place—I was in Al Jenkins' cabin in Jerktown and there was a knot on my head as big as an egg where somebody had hit me with a gun-butt!

Skinnymalink was tied up, too, and so was Ravenhill. Skinnymalink looked tired, and her hair was all mussed up, but she looked happy for all of it, and at peace with the world. She looked wiser than hell, Skinnymalink did—like she'd found something she'd been looking for all her twenty years.

"Don't take it so hard, Dad," she said. "We're still alive. Probably they'll bring us some coffee and something to eat pretty soon."

"Who the hell wants coffee?" I asked her.

"Relax," she said. "I know you're tired and need something stronger than coffee. But take it easy—I'll bet you a quarter Haggarty will bring you a drink when he comes to get us!"

"What do you mean—when he comes to get us?" I asked. "He's only one guy and there's twenty miles of narrow gorge for him to pass through—and twenty, thirty men watching that gorge."

"Haggarty's still alive," she said, calm and cool, "and he'll be here. So take it easy."

"All right, Sis," I said, humoring her—marvelling at what love could do to a woman. But hell, I wasn't in love with Haggarty—I was tired and cold and felt older than Jerusalem and I needed a drink so damned bad I could taste it. How the hell was Haggarty going to whip twenty or thirty men all holed up behind rocks and trees and waiting for him? Love was wonderful, I thought—but it wouldn't lick a problem like that.

"Al," I yelled at Al Jenkins, "bring me a drink, damn your eyes. I've fed you for twenty years, mostly against my wishes I'll admit—but still I've fed you. Bring me a drink, Al!"

"Sure, Mr. Benedict," Al Jenkins said, "got a nice bottle of the Senator's scotch. Let me untie you for a while. Have a slug or two while I cook you some bacon and eggs."

Al untied me and Ravenhill and Skinnymalink and we rubbed our wrists while Al sizzled us some bacon and dropped some eggs into the pan. I poured me a big slug of scotch and, man, that kerosene tasted good!

"You can go outside and wash up a little, if you'll give me your word you'll come back and eat and let me tie you up again," Al said. "But you got to promise, Mr. Benedict."

"Thanks, Al," I told him, "we'll go one at a time. That way you've still got two of us if one don't come back."

"All right," Al said, "but you couldn't none of you get thirty feet away from the place anyways. I ain't taking much of a chance."

So we went out one at a time and tidied up a little and came back and ate bacon and eggs and drank a hell of a lot of coffee—and all at once I felt better about the whole deal.

Maybe Haggarty would put it over, after all. Maybe Skinnymalink was right! Maybe love would kill twenty or thirty men armed with .30-.30s!

Yeah—but I doubted it. It was just a full stomach and a big slug of Scotch working up thoughts in me. Hell, nobody could lick odds like that. Not even Ace-in-the-Hole Haggarty!

☆ 24 ☆

We spent three days cooped up in Al Jenkins' cabin in Jerktown—three cramped, restless days of pacing up and down, three long nights when none of us could sleep worth a damn.

Three days and nights—and Love and Haggarty didn't do a damned thing to help us. We were still there, and I had a sinking feeling that we were going to be killed there—for I couldn't figure the Senator to let three live witnesses run around loose.

Along about sundown of the third day the Senator came riding up the gorge on his fancy horse, prancing along like a young buck showing off for his best girl. Happy as hell the Senator was.

“Your man Haggarty seems to be showing a yellow streak, Harry,” he told me. “He's holed up at the Big Hat ranch house like he was ready for a siege. Got men behind every building and wagon bed, and strung all along the stock pond dam. He sure isn't taking any chances!”

“He's probably making it all up, Dad,” Skinny-

malink said, "or else the men he had spying told Haggarty all wrong about it."

"No, they didn't tell me," the Senator said. "I've been watching them all day. At a safe distance, of course—these binoculars are very strong. You can see with them a lot farther than you can be seen—lots farther than a rifle will carry."

"Haggarty's just throwing a bluff," I said, before I thought—but I didn't tip Haggarty's hand. The Senator had sensed the same thing.

"Of course he is, Harry," the Senator said, all swelled up with how smart he was. "He'll probably try to sneak up the gorge tonight, thinking we won't be expecting him after what we saw. But he hasn't got a chance—every man on the place except Al Jenkins and me will be down in that gorge."

"Would you like to place a bet, Senator?" Ravenhill asked.

"You don't think he has a chance, do you, Red?" the Senator wanted to know.

"Betting is my profession," Ravenhill said. "Every time I meet a man with positive opinions like yours I'll take his bet—if the odds are right. But, if you are afraid to bet any more than you have, I'll let the matter drop!"

"What odds do you want?" the Senator asked.

"They're all in your favor," Ravenhill said. "No

doubt you planned to kill us, anyway. So I will bet the lives of the three of us against your life."

"I don't quite follow you, Red," the Senator said, and neither did I.

"Haggarty's deadline date expires at noon tomorrow—and you won't kill us before then. And—if he should outfox you and clean you all up before then—we will let you live. It's a hundred to one shot, Senator—but it's to your advantage. You've nothing to lose and everything to gain if Haggarty wins this deal."

"It's a good bet. You be the witness, Al," the Senator laughed to Al Jenkins. "If Haggarty kills all the boys off you see he spares me! "

"Whatever you say, Mr. Pearce," Jenkins said.

Somehow or other I slept that night for the first time in three nights. Everything was settled, in my mind. Haggarty didn't have a chance—and I'd be dead at noon the next day. Somehow I could stand the thought of that more than the uncertainty of the three days before. But I couldn't help wondering where and how Haggarty would die. Somehow or other that seemed more important than me dying—for he was the guy that had been taking care of little Jinglebob; he ought to go on taking care of him.

My mind must have worked on it all night while I slept—for I woke up more rested than I had been in years, but still worried about Haggarty trying to get

up that gorge—for somehow or other I knew he would try. And I knew he didn't have a Chinaman's chance!

Jerktown was around thirty miles from the Big Hat ranch house where Haggarty had been holed up at sundown the day before. The last ten miles of the way narrowed down to a trail through Rustlers Gorge—or just “The Gorge” as most folks called it. It was a right narrow canyon—never over thirty, forty feet wide—and the walls closed in to ten to fifteen feet at every bend and turn. It was a place where one man could hold off a hundred and the gamblers were stingy in their odds—it should have been a thousand to one odds that no man could come up that narrow canyon in the face of thirty guns.

There was only one way I figured Haggarty could do it, and I reckon the Senator figured the same way, come daylight. There were ten or fifteen places in that canyon where a man could work his way down from the ridges above and lower himself on a couple of hundred feet of rope to the canyon floor. There were a few tall pines to hide him, and Haggarty stood half a chance of doing it that way if the Jerktown jiggers weren't watching for him. But they were.

Al Jenkins went down the canyon with a wagon full of coffee and grub for the men—and placed them so the bends of the canyon were guarded, and so that every low place on the rim, where a man could lower himself

down, had jiggers with rifles to rake it from both sides. There wasn't a big boulder in that canyon that didn't have a Jerktown outlaw behind it when Al Jenkins got through with them that morning. Every damned one of them was down the canyon—except Al Jenkins and the Senator and three fellows watching the horses.

“Looks like the Senator was going to copper all bets,” Al Jenkins said to us as he was stirring up lunch, right before noon. “I'm right sorry in a way. I've been making a good living off you folks for years, and I hate to see you go.”

“You could sell the Senator out, Al,” Skinnymalink joked with him. “You could shoot him while he's dozing in that chair. Likely Haggarty will kill you if you don't!”

“I admire your spunk, Miss Anne,” Al Jenkins said. “But then your old man is a tough old rooster and you're bound to have a little of it in you yourself. Shore do hate to see you get bumped off.”

Al Jenkins was so busy feeling sorry for Skinny-malink that he didn't hear her cock the pistol she took out of her blouse—a little sawed off belly-gun that I'd seen in Haggarty's warbag!

“Jenkins,” Skinnymalink said, laughing as she said it, “I hate to use such language, but you're crazy as hell. It's like taking candy away from babies. Face the wall, Al, and raise your hands or you'll go to hell so fast

you'll never know what killed you. Don't even breathe until Dad gets you tied up."

Jenkins had felt lots of guns in his back before and knew what was prodding against his backbone—and he turned to the wall and raised his hands until I could get 'em tied. And then I cracked the Senator over the head with a chunk of stove wood while he dozed in his chair, knocking him out cold—and tied him up, too!

"You've got the drop right now, Miss Anne," Al Jenkins said, "but it's a waste of time. Soon as the boys get Haggarty they'll be back to stop your clock—and those jiggers watching the horses will get you if you try to leave the cabin!"

"You think so, Al—you think so?" Skinnymalink snapped at him. "Open the window, Dad—the window that faces on to the trail that leads up over the pass into Arizona!" And when I opened it she said, "Listen close—what do you hear, Al Jenkins, what do you hear!"

He heard what I heard—but it wasn't music to his ears like it was to mine. Faint and far away I could hear a horse fancy-footing down the trail from over the pass, from over Arizona way—and faint and far-away I could hear somebody singing that damned song of Haggarty's!

That song got clearer and clearer in the cold winter air—the pale moon was still shining above the green

mountain—and Haggarty came around the bend leading a packhorse loaded down with five gallon cans just about the time the song got to the truth in her eyes and all that malarkey!

But we weren't the only ones that heard Haggarty singing. The three jiggers watching the horses heard him, too—and they all threw down on Haggarty. Guns blazed and one of the cans on the packhorse got punctured—but Haggarty just came riding on, singing as he came, riding through a rain of lead—until he got close enough for Jinglebob's .38s to be felt!

And then what fancy shooting Haggarty did—he shot all three of those jiggers in their gun arms, he shot their hats off and he blasted the heels off their boots as they ran down the trail to join the rest of the Jerktown gang. He even managed to cut suspenders of one of them, just like he had mine in Ravenhill's place that night—and sent the jigger rolling end over appetite down the trail.

“Morning, folks,” Haggarty said. “You all right, Miss Anne?”

“Never been better, Johnny,” Skinnymalink said—and I reckon she never had been.

“Here's your bottle of Old Crow, Grandpop,” Haggarty told me, “but I didn't stop to bring your fish-bowl. Reckon you'll just have to guess at the size of your slug. You rather spread the kerosene around,

while I go down the canyon a piece and hold them outlaws off a while—or vice versa, Red? ” Haggarty asked Ravenhill.

“ Glad you gave me a choice,” Ravenhill said. “ I’ve been cooped up in this blasted place for three days—if you don’t mind I’ll take my exercise down the canyon. I’m even better with a rifle than a derringer! ”

So Haggarty poured can after can of kerosene on the Jerktown cabins and outbuildings—and after we’d driven off enough horses for ourselves, the Senator and Al Jenkins, we fired the place. The flames licked up those dry old cabins—and they spread to the brush and finally to the pines—and before you could say Jack Robinson a forest fire was raging down Rustlers Gorge. Ravenhill got out just in time—but the rustlers didn’t. They had to go down the canyon, scared as rabbits, ahead of that wall of fire. We never found any remains of them, so they must have got out somehow—but they never came back to the Big Hat Basin!

We went up the Arizona trail to the top of the pass and over it about a mile—and Haggarty pointed down the trail to Arizona.

“ If I were you I’d go that way, Senator,” Haggarty said. “ I reckon you’ve done lost your influence in the Big Hat Basin. And it would be a pleasure to kill you if I ever saw you again. Ravenhill’s bet is only binding on this one deal—so don’t tempt me! ”

"Thank you, Haggarty, thank you," the Senator said. "You are kinder than I would be in similar circumstances. Tell me just one thing, will you—how did you get on to that short trail along the rimrock? I thought nobody knew about it but me. It should have taken you five or six days to ride around the mountains to come in from the Arizona side. I didn't even bother to protect my rear. How did you figure that trail out? "

"Oh, that? " Haggarty laughed. "It was a horse told me. Didn't actually talk to me—but when I killed that rustler a spell back I turned his horse loose. He made a bee-line for your place and right on up into the hills. Followed that rimrock trail and came out on the Arizona side, just like those two steers a day been doing for years. Never trust a horse with a secret again, Senator! "

* * *

That about winds up my story of Ace-in-the-Hole Haggarty. We rode on down the Senator's rimrock trail and were back at the Big Hat in seven, eight hours.

MacGregor was there waiting for us. MacGregor and little Jinglebob and his mamma. Little Jinglebob was three and a half, "going on four," and Mac had taught him to say "Grandpop" on the train coming over—and it was a real nice home-coming.

Quite a guy MacGregor was—he had lent the Governor of Arizona a hundred bucks when the Governor was

just a cowhand down on his luck. Mac didn't have no trouble at all getting a pardon for Haggarty after he'd told him all the facts in the case—particularly now that Johnny Casino was legally dead!

I bought a ranch right out of Phoenix for Jinglebob and his mamma to live on—seems like she does better in Arizona's dry hot climate.

I been spending most of my time over there lately, teaching little Jinglebob how to sit his saddle and turn his horse with his knees—but it looks like I'll have to go back to the Big Hat pretty soon. Looks like I might have another grandson pretty soon—or maybe a granddaughter. Hope it's a granddaughter.

Yeah—they got married, all right, Skinnymalink and Haggarty.

THE END

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